

Epiphany 5.01.14

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

(May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen)

I have just read a novel called 'Unholy Night' by an author called Seth Grahame-Smith. It may not have crossed your radar – he is most famous for writing 'Pride, Prejudice and Zombies' and 'Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter' but 'Unholy Night' is a surprising novel about the three Wise Men.

This is from the back cover of the book:

“It is one of history’s most iconic moments: three men on camels arrive at a stable, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. An impossibly bright star is suspended in the vast desert sky above. It’s a moment of serenity and of grace. A holy night.

But what do we really know about these wise men from the East? The Bible tells us little about this enigmatic trio. Not even their names. The historical record is vague. How do we even know they were kings?”

The author starts from this point and weaves a fantastic tale, involving Balthazar, Gaspar and Melchior, renowned thieves and conmen, who, in fleeing for their lives from a murderous King Herod, happen upon Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus and who have no choice but to help them to escape to Egypt when the slaughter of the innocents begins. The book is not for the faint-hearted, but I found it fascinating, and it made me realise how mysterious the wise men really are, and how significant their impact on the Nativity narrative. This book was the start of my Epiphany thoughts for this morning.

Matthew is the only Gospel to even mention the wise men, and so everything the Bible tells us about them is contained in the 12 verses, which we read as our Gospel today. They get a very brief mention in verse 16, when Herod discovers that they have not returned to him after visiting Jesus, and is furious, but this is all the detail we are given about them.

Matthew tells us the important facts:

Firstly, they are Magi, a term referring to a priestly caste who paid particular attention to the stars and who gained a reputation for being astrologers and scientists. We get our word 'magic' from the same root, which, I think, adds to their air of mystery, and 'otherworldliness'. The King James version of the Bible translated Magi as 'wise men' and this has become common usage.

Secondly, the Magi were Gentiles, from the East, probably from southern Arabia or Persia. They announce the reason for their journey, and their search to King Herod, and so we know that they were aware of, and believed, the prophecies about the coming King of the Jews. They knew what the star meant and they desired to follow it, and pay homage to the new-born King.

Thirdly, they were well-respected, and were granted an audience with Herod in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital city, where they would have expected to find the new King.

Fourthly, the Magi didn't arrive in a crowded stable on a busy night, to complete a nativity tableau. Instead, they visited the child and his mother in a house, some time later. We are not told how much time had elapsed, but we do know that Herod ordered the massacre of all boys under two years old, which suggests that some time had passed before the wise men arrived.

Finally, we are told that, in response to encountering the child, they bent their knees, bowed down and worshipped him. They recognized him for who he was, and they gave him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And then they leave, quietly and without fanfare. They are warned in a dream, and so return to their country by another route so as to protect the child and to avoid Herod and his deadly intentions.

The rest of the Epiphany story, which we celebrate today, has arisen from a combination of legend and tradition. The extra details are valuable because they shed light on the story and help us to understand more about the importance of this Bethlehem encounter.

We refer to them as the three wise men, only because they carried three gifts. However, Christian tradition, from the earliest days of the church has promoted this, and has given them names, nationalities and identities. We know the Wise Men as Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar, or Gaspar. This was first discussed in a Greek manuscript, composed in Alexandria in around AD500. In this document, they were represented as Kings, rather than Magi, and we still sing about and make reference to the three Kings today. They were depicted as being from distinct lands in the East, giving them a wide geographical spread. It has been argued that the use of the word 'King' gives them the authority they require in the narrative, and that calling them Kings fulfils the prophecy we heard about in today's Old Testament reading in Isaiah chapter 60:

“And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord”

This is linked to Psalm 72, verse 10:

“The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
will bring tribute to him;
the kings of Sheba and Seba
will present him gifts”

The prophecy is that the Kings of all nations will recognize Jesus as Lord; that Gentiles as well as Jews will kneel and worship him, and that the nations will honour him with their wealth.

In this way, the Wise Men, who journeyed to pay him homage, are the representatives of all nations, and the Christian traditions expand this. Giotto, in his frescoes in the Arena Chapel, painted in the 14th Century, demonstrates an excellent example of this. He shows Caspar as an old man, with a white beard. He is first in line, gives the gold to the Christ-child, and is a King of Tarsus, on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey. Melchior is seen as

middle-aged, giving Frankincense from his native Arabia, and Balthasar is a young, black-skinned man, presenting myrrh from Saba, which is roughly comparable to Southern Yemen. In artistic representations, dating between the 12th and 15th centuries, Balthasar is increasingly seen as a black King, and coming from a variety of regions in Africa.

This view of the Kings as representative of all nations was also promoted by “The History of the Three Kings” written by John of Hildesheim, a Carmelite Friar, who lived between about 1310 to 1375, in Germany. He believed that the Kings only met on the outskirts of Jerusalem, having travelled from their own lands “in great haste” and without stopping until they could present their gifts to the baby and his mother.

This ‘history’ is fascinating and goes into great detail about the Kings after they returned to their own countries, with lives changed irrevocably by their holy encounter.

Considering the significance of the three gifts also sheds light on the nature of the new born King. Gold, frankincense and myrrh are definitely odd presents for a child, and it is hard not to wonder if Mary would have preferred blankets and nappies instead! St Bernard in the 12th century did try to offer a practical explanation for the gifts, stating that gold was given to Mary “to relieve her poverty, incense against the stench of the stable...and myrrh...to put away vermin”

This was never an accepted view, but it may have been easier for the new parents to believe this, rather than the notion that gold was given to a King, incense to a priest and that myrrh was used for anointing. The meaning of these would have felt so completely alien to a family who were trying to protect themselves, and particularly their child in very difficult and dangerous circumstances. The words of the carol “We Three Kings” sum up the gifts far better than I can:

“Glorious now, behold him
Arise – King and God and Sacrifice”

The baby, to whom they gave the gifts was their King; was God in human form, and would pay the ultimate sacrifice, giving himself for the world he had been born into. The gifts tell us so much about Jesus, and remind us of exactly why Epiphany is so important. The Wise Men underline the nativity narrative, and turn it from a familiar story, that we have made perfect for children, into the beginnings of Jesus' earthly ministry. Epiphany demonstrates to us how God works, using his people from every nation to remind us of the significance of the birth of Christ, and to set us on a journey with him.

This is a quotation from the last chapter of "Unholy Night"

"Balthazar never saw Joseph or Mary again, but he'd felt them in his soul in the years that followed. When word of their son's arrest and crucifixion reached him from Jerusalem, he'd wept. Not because he adhered to any of the man's teachings – or even knew what those teachings were, for that matter – but because he'd held him as a baby, because he'd felt him always and still."

I found this very affecting. The Wise Men, even in the novel, were changed by their meeting with Jesus. In reality, the lives of the magi could never have been the same again.

I am going to finish my Epiphany thoughts with this. Gregory the Great, during his papacy, studied the Kings. I am poorly paraphrasing a 6th Century Pope here but he was deeply affected by the idea that the Wise Men had to return by a different route. He commented that this is true of all of us: that having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came. An encounter with Jesus, in whatever form it takes, has to affect us so profoundly, that we must be changed by it. We cannot go back to what we were before, and our lives must take a different route.

As 2014 begins, and we leave the old year behind, I'd like that to be the thought that we leave here with, this morning. Let's take a different route this year, having encountered the Christ-child this Christmas time, and start our journey afresh with him.

I wish you a Happy and Holy New Year.