

If the wise men had not studied the stars, if they had not co-operated in their quest for the truth about the new king, if they had not travelled to Jerusalem and made inquiries, would Herod ever have known about the birth of Jesus and would the deaths of hundreds of babies been avoided?

As Matthew tells the story of the Magi travelling from Persia to pay homage to the newborn king, we see them as astrologers or mathematicians, or perhaps scientists, interpreting the signs around them and seeking after truth. They were not Jews, yet these foreigners revealed the birth of the Messiah, unleashed knowledge into an unsuspecting country.

This is what scientists do. Once knowledge has been released, it can never be suppressed and it can have unintended consequences. The Magi did not intend any harm to children. They did not seek to overthrow Herod. We might call them kings, but they were not political figures. But there were disastrous consequences to their travels.

And so it is whenever we seek truth. For knowledge is dangerous – the writers of the book of Genesis knew a thing or two when they wrote about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With understanding of the most dangerous germs comes the power to heal, and the power to create biological weapons. With the knowledge to create energy from fossil fuels comes global warming. Truth is neither good nor bad, but it can be used as a force for good or evil.

The wise men, like truth itself, are morally neutral in the narrative. They come to pay homage to the king. We do not know if, as T. S. Eliot imagines, they are changed by their encounter, or whether they return to their study and tables of stars with one more interesting fact under their belts. But they have been the agents of transformation. To the travellers staying at the Inn and all who live around, three rich men visiting a family in a stable would not go unnoticed. There would be much talk: 'who is this child?' Their presence would signal that something extraordinary had occurred. The fact that their visit triggered Herod's massacre of the children would also be a very strong signal. This baby, whoever he was, was a threat to the established order. The responsibility for this knowledge, once released, was passed on to everyone who heard, and it still is. Do we use it for good, or for ill?

This question affects us all. Not only do we have to take responsibility for the scientific knowledge we have inherited, seeking wisdom to use it for the benefit of others, but so too for the religious knowledge we have imbibed since birth. We can use it to exclude or to punish those of differing views. We can use it to feel superior. Or we can use it in service of others.

The story which we see enacted in nativity plays and portrayed in crib scenes throughout the country is a threat to the established order. The poor are playing host to the rich. The rich are bowing down before the poor. A new source of power has been discovered that does not obey the old rules. If we accept this potentially dangerous knowledge, then we have to acknowledge this new order, individually and as a church and that will not be popular with those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. There will be unintended consequences.

For the most part we pretend that the knowledge of Jesus is safe, that we can accept it without change. We can concentrate on the buildings, on the style of worship, on music, while keeping the really dangerous bit under wraps. But the knowledge is out there. It cannot be suppressed.

Paul felt impelled to write, even from prison. He could not keep this knowledge to himself, and eventually it cost him his life, as was true also for Peter and for many other of the apostles. So many have died because the knowledge that God does not have favourites, that he cares for the poor and refugees is simply too challenging.

We have been given everything we need to create heaven on earth, a place of peace and plenty. All that is required is that we forfeit all jealousy, all greed, all hatred, all lust, all violence. The trouble is that it requires only one person to wreck this idyll. How we deal with the one person who destroys is critical to whether the ideal can remain, for it is far too easy to become a guardian of religious truth by becoming a destroyer oneself.

As the old hymn states, we have a gospel to proclaim. It is a gospel message that challenges us to an alternative way of life. We can encounter this gospel, leave our gifts and go back to our old life by another route. Or we can allow ourselves to be transformed, to attempt to live the gospel life, recognising that this will never be a comfortable place to be, that we may be chasing an ideal that can never be reached in our lifetime, but knowing that by keeping the ideal alive, at whatever cost, we are using the knowledge we have been given to the best of our ability.