

A Epiphany

7/1/17

1

Place: St Mary's

Theme: How difficult it is to find God. Matt. 1-12

- ◆ How many wise men are there in the story of Epiphany? Three, more than three, less than three? I don't know if you noticed, but Matthew doesn't tell us. He just says that 'wise men from the East' or Magi, came. Tradition has it that there were three because of the three gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.
- ◆ So, if we don't know how many wise men – or women – there were, how many groups of wise men were there? This Matthew does tell us. There are two distinct groups of scholars or wise men in the story. The first group are the Gentile astronomers, the mages, who are travellers from afar. They are outsiders, who have seen something and interpreted it according to the knowledge, wisdom and understanding of their own culture. They have seen a star.
- ◆ The second group are insiders, they are the chief priests and scribes. They would have had a very similar position in Herod's court to that held by the magi in the countries they came from. Both groups were the educated elite, who were turned to by the Ruler in times of crisis to advise them. We don't know how many wise men there were, or even if they were all men, but we do know that there were two distinct groups each with

their own culture, wisdom and insight. One group are outsiders; visitors who have come from far away. The other group are the insiders who are at home in Herod's court. They were schooled in the scriptures and traditions of Israel.

- ◆ Finding God is difficult whether you are on the inside of religion or the outside. Both sets of wise men, despite having the resources of education, wealth and intellect at their disposal do not find God easily. One group, who might have been thought to have the advantages does not find God at all.
- ◆ We need to heed the warning that the chief priests and scribes demonstrate to us. Although they worship regularly, know the scriptures and have the leisure to pray, the chief priests and scribes do not know that God is among them. They cannot see.
- ◆ What is ever worse than that, when they hear news of His coming they do not rejoice, they are terrified. While they perform as worshippers to God, in fact they are followers of Herod. They have invested in him and his kingdom, they are not interested in what God wants, they just want to protect the king. Rather than rejoicing at the fulfilment of scripture and going with the Magi to find the Christ Child they stay with Herod and collude in Herod's murderous plans.
- ◆ The Chief Priests and the scribes remind us that going to church and saying our prayers is not

enough. If we are to find God we need to be Christ's disciples and follow his lead to the Kingdom. Our first allegiance must be to Christ. If we do this, we will then become outsiders. Once we commit ourselves to Christ's kingdom, we discover that all the other structures and institutions of the world are transitory, even the religious ones. We are sojourners and pilgrims here on earth. The Church is the society of those who are travelling together seeking God and his Kingdom. Like the Magi we become strangers and outsiders.

- ◆ However, being on the outside is not easy either. We easily end up looking in the wrong places for God. We look in the places where we are familiar with finding earthly power to discover divine power. The magi went to the palace of Herod in their first attempt, rather than to the stable. The Magi discover that while they may be rich, wise and educated at home, they are fools in their search for God. They do not know the scriptures, they do not know exactly what they are looking for. Through their folly, they put the very person they are seeking in mortal danger. Their actions tip Herod off to Jesus's birth and leads to the massacre of the innocents.
- ◆ Despite their folly they do find the Christ. They bring together the knowledge they have and what they have learned from the chief priests and scribes and they go out and look for themselves.

Because they are outside they can see the star. In Bethlehem they discover that God is to be found not in the expected places, but on the outside too.

- ◆ Being on the outside they can recognise that it is God's grace which leads them, not their own understanding. Grace is the star that leads them and the grace teaches them to recognise what they are seeking, when they finally find it.
- ◆ When they find the Christ, they are finding God's grace. God gift of himself to us, given to us in our folly and weakness. Coming to us despite the mistakes we make and the problems we cause. The true wisdom of the magi is not so much their finding the child as their response when they do. They recognise the inestimable value of what they have found, they recognise the gift of God that Jesus Christ is and so they respond with the most precious gifts they have: gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- ◆ Ones we know our need of God, once we know that we are all on the outside, foolish and ignorant, we can begin to discover the power and beauty of the grace of God in our lives, brighter than any star.
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