

Kneel and adore him!

This is the story of two kinds of kings and an unnumbered cohort of curious inquirers.

We call them the three kings or wisemen or magi. But we don't really know their number, just the number of gifts laid before Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Their visit to pay homage captured the imagination of Christians through the centuries. It is interesting that we have a Christian festival for the visit of these well-travelled visitors – Epiphany. But we don't have one for the shepherds, for their visit to the birthplace of Jesus is wrapped up entirely in the nativity story.

What has grown up around this visitation is a form of what might be called Christian midrash – something of a binding of stories, and imaginings, which have promoted these mysterious figures into royalty (three kings of Orient are) and stargazers (Magi – people who followed the track of the stars, quasi scientists, quasi magicians).

And of course, we all at different times of our lives – even this year – have enjoyed the mashing up of the two birth narratives of Luke (and the shepherds and angels) and Matthew (and the three kings). I have seen the pictures of the great band of you who helped tell this story to many hundreds of children in the run up to Christmas.

Somehow or another, Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus captures our hearts and minds. We love the grandeur, the camels, the rich robes, the wonderful treasure chests – did you know the Greek for those treasure chests is thesaurus: quite literally. We love the symbolism of the star which moves and then abruptly stops, the star which it seems no-one else could see, but only these star-gazing scientists and astrologers from Persia and possibly beyond, maybe even Afghanistan.

But why does Matthew tell us this story? And what difference might it make to us today, to us who maybe are so familiar with it, have heard it all before, that it is difficult to grasp its

significance for us in these early days of 2026? I would like to draw out three themes.

1. Journeying – and pilgrimage
2. Mistakes – and recovery
3. Choosing – and worshipping

Journeying and pilgrimage

I love to walk, sometimes long distances. Something happens on the path. It teaches you simplicity and gives clarity. By that, I mean that when you are on a long walk you set off with a destination in mind. There is something focused about the task. The long-distance path teaches you the need for determination and persistence. It teaches you the benefits of companions on the way (you know that word means ‘with bread people’). Quite simply, movement is good for the body and the soul. Moving, keeping moving, broadens your perspective, it opens up your mind and heart to new experiences, it enables new connections to be made. These star-gazing companions were curious observers of the heavens. They spotted one particular celestial body out of the

billions scattered across the clear night sky of Persia or even Afghanistan, and they began moving. What sparks a pilgrimage? What might have made you take a long journey with a particular destination in mind? For these gift-bearers remembered by Matthew, it was the conviction that this one star out of billions was significant and marked the birth of a new kind of king.

In your Christian pilgrimage of the years and decades, what has prompted you to follow Jesus? What has drawn you on? Who have been your companions? No matter what others may have thought about your convictions about Jesus, what have you learned by journeying on? Maybe you have got stuck sometimes – stuck with doubts or a sense of malaise? Maybe you are moving from a time when faith seemed simple to something that requires much more complex wrestling. Maybe, as we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany – which celebrates new revelation – you long for some clarity without denying complexity? Perhaps journeying here today, you could take the opportunity of laying down your ‘burden of

carefulness' at Jesus' feet. We journey with our companions, those who arrived at Jerusalem with questions and some perplexity.

Mistakes and recovery

A second lesson for us in this story can perhaps be found in the mistakes made by these long-distance travellers. One might be forgiven for thinking of them as unwise men. Why oh why did they go straight to Herod in the first place? If they were convinced, as the story says, about a newborn king, why did they ask that question of the current king?

Surely, they were asking for trouble. And, as we know, their naive actions unleashed the paranoid rage of Herod, who went on to massacre every boy child under the age of two (it's all there later in chapter 2). This terrible mistake, of going to one cruel and violent king in order to find a very different king, might seem an irredeemable error. But mistakes, even of the monumental kind, are never the end with our gracious God. They had ended up in Jerusalem and seen the splendour and earthly glory of the palace and had

assumed the answer to their question – where is this new king to be born – quite naturally would mean ‘in a palace’. As we know from Matthew’s account, this news unsettled all Jerusalem, not just Herod and his counsellors. But in making this mistake, the Magi were given greater clarity in their search. They were given local insight. Bethlehem was the destination, six miles away.

Sometimes, we learn the greatest wisdom from mistakes, wrong turns, poor decisions, unforeseen and difficult choices. Sometimes we beat ourselves up and get stuck in that place. There is a lovely story told by Trevor Dennis, former Dean of Chester cathedral, about these so-called wise men. He tells of a journalist interviewing them in their tents much later on. They are sat there with children all around them as the reporter interviews them. They still ruminate about their mistakes and the sorrow of the massacre which resulted in their foolishness. But instead of staying stuck with the weight of it all, they have taken new steps. They have

together opened up an orphanage.
Their mistake has led to great hope.

Choosing and worshipping

Their mistake, of course led them to the greatest hope of all. After many months, may even years, of walking, they arrive at their destination. Matthew tells us they are overwhelmed with joy. It must have been an amazing thing for them. They must have questioned their sanity at times. Perhaps despite their convictions, they were also sometimes overwhelmed with doubt and questions and possible recriminations. But all that is forgotten in this moment of arrival. Their choices have led them to this moment – and what do we notice they do? They kneel down and worship.

How surprising this must have been to Mary and Joseph and Jesus too. Jesus may have been two years old by now. Matthew tells us they are living in a house (no stable, this, or cave). These tired and elated travellers from afar suddenly appear before Mary and Joseph and Jesus and they open up their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ‘Gold of obedience and incense

of lowliness' as the hymn (we shall sing a little later) says. Gold symbolising obedience to a King; frankincense which recognises the divine nature of Jesus; myrrh, as a sign of his mortality, the fragrance which is rubbed into the body of someone who has died.

This is their worship, then. Worship which recognises who Jesus is – a true king, a divine son of God and the one who dies for us.

When we choose to worship, what draw us to Christ? Is it the promise that he is our Emmanuel, the one who is 'with us' every step of our life, the one who does not just come to visit us, but to stay with us? Our Christmas visitors have been and gone, but Christ is here to stay. Or is it homage which takes obedience, even when we are sorrowful and struggling to find answers to troubling questions, yet choosing to keep trusting in our tearfulness? Are we seeking 'trust for our trembling and hope for our fear' as we worship today? Or perhaps you choose to worship today because of the beauty of Christ in the holiness you are discovering, a

holiness which finds its place first in the reality of life (not somewhere ethereal). Heaven touching earth, and this heaven has a name – Jesus.

Conclusion

We may not feel very wise. We may not have exotic gifts of gold, frankincense or myrrh. We may not have travelled for hundreds of miles to be here. But we are heirs of these travellers. As the Isaiah passage and the writing of Paul to the Ephesians tell us, we are, like these Magi, gentiles from a far distant land and a far distant century. We too are pilgrims. We too have made mistakes which are recoverable, redeemable even. We too are invited to choose to worship, to enter into His courts in the ‘slenderness of the poor wealth we might reckon as ours’ because we come before a tender, gracious, loving God who chooses to be identified in the frame of a child, who eventually hangs on the frame of a cross, and in that act of obedience and lowliness, overturns all the fears and failings of this world. Kneel and adore him, the Lord is His Name!

Rev'd Paul Hinton, Epiphany Sunday
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