

Sunday, 10 January 2016

[the wise follow the star- Matt 2](#)

[Matt 2:1-12](#)

It is a strange and mysterious passage that is only mentioned by the Gospel of Matthew. Men came to Palestine from somewhere in the East- perhaps Persia, or Arabia, or maybe somewhere else, we don't know.

The men who come are equally mysterious (were they all men?). They were not kings according to Matthew. We think of them as kings because this passage made people think of passages of the Bible like Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 that talk about the kings of the nations coming to Israel to give gifts and pay homage. They were not Jews. They were probably gentiles (which just means "not Jewish"). They are called "Magi" in the plural, but "Magus" in the singular. It is a word that has a few definitions and can refer to a practitioner of occult magic arts, to someone who would divine the future, to an interpreter of dreams (like the prophet Daniel, or Joseph), or to those who study the night sky. A magus was a mysterious person, with mysterious knowledge of things hidden to ordinary people. It is from the Greek word magus that we get the word "Magician". Magus can also be correctly translated as 'sorcerer', or as 'wise man'. In the world of the Magi the universe was an interconnected whole. If something important was happening on earth that would be reflected in the heavens. If an important king died or was born, they would expect to see some sign of it in the stars (if you know where to look). Adding to the mystery, the Bible warns about consulting astrologers, diviners, and

magicians. Dream interpreters seem to be the exception. And yet we find the magi in a positive light here.

The star itself is also mysterious. We really don't know what the Magi were looking at when they saw the star. Craig Chester, an astronomer for the Montaray Institute of Geophysics and Astrophysics, has stated that it is safe to say that every astrophysical event between 7 and 1 BC has been proposed to be the Bethlehem star (a fact I learned from Darrel Johnson, a prof at Regent College). We don't know if they were looking at a supernova, or a comet, or at some configuration of the planet Jupiter and Saturn. The star seems to move and then stops. It also seems to point. Have you ever gave direction to someone by saying "it's the house right under Jupiter"? This led some early church commentators to say that it was actually an angel that led the Magi.

The Magi go to find the one born King of the Jews and so they naturally are led to Jerusalem and cruel King Herod. Herod was actually a descendant of the people of Edom, and was placed in power by the Romans (hardly the rightful heir to the throne of David). We also know that he was so paranoid about protecting his throne that at the end of his days he had three of his own children executed for treason. Mysteriously, the Magi found no newly born king in the palaces of Jerusalem. Instead 6 miles away, in the town of Bethlehem, in humble conditions, they found the child they were looking for.

Because this passage is so mysterious and intriguing many commentators have used their imaginations to fill in the gaps. "Three" Magi have been imagined because there were

three gifts, but Matthew says nothing about how many there were except that there was more than one. The three Magi were even given names by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century. One was “Melchior”, an old man with white hair and long beard. “Gaspar” was young and beardless with a ruddy complexion. “Balthasar” had dark colored skin and a big beard. The multi-ethnic group was believed to represent the Gentile world that would also benefit from Jesus’ saving action, as they were welcomed into the family of Abraham.

Early commentators also put theological weight on the gifts given to the baby Jesus. Gold, they said, was a gift worthy of a king. Frankincense was a kind of incense offered in worship and so was a gift worthy of a god. Myrrh was a spice used for embalming a dead body and prophetically points to Jesus’ death on the cross. This isn’t wrong, however, Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh, were valuable gifts that might be given to any king, especially if the Magi were from Arabia where the gifts would be more easily obtained.

Here we have these mysterious strangers drawn to the baby Jesus by something they called a star. After meeting the cruel and paranoid Herod greedily clutching at his throne, they are led by the scriptures to an unexpected place to meet the child born king of the Jews. With exceedingly great joy they recognize him as the one they are looking for, and worship him (an action not unusual for polytheistic gentiles meeting an important king, though worship of a king would be an unusual action for a Jew). They then open their treasure chests to give little Jesus gifts fit for a king. Finally, they are warned by a dream to avoid Herod on their return journey.

This must have been a strange experience for the Magi. They go to another part of the world where what you do for a living is considered illegal, the language is different, and the beliefs are strange, and you are going there to worship a child no one else seems to be making a big deal about.

I have to say that I find this passage mystifying, but I think it touches me on level that makes it hard for me not to see myself in the story. I had pretty much rejected Christianity by the time I became a teenager. Like the magi I felt the need to search for some sort of spiritual truth. I imagined that there was some sort of power in the moon, sun, and stars. There was a time that I considered myself a Wiccan. I Wiccan would probably love to be considered a "Magus". I was looking for some kind of power that would bring me happiness. I was looking for a spiritual path that was exciting, but that also gave me some control over my own life. I wanted to feel at home in my skin. I wanted to feel at home on the earth. I wanted to feel content and like my life had meaning. But, it was always illusive. This meant that I drifted always looking for another path- Another theory- Another philosophy. Another something that would bring me a new epiphany and would help me see my life in a new way.

Like the Magi, I once saw something like a star. My star was an experience I had in a bar. I had just arrived with a few friends when I was overwhelmed by a feeling I can only describe as love, but it was so intense that I want to capitalize it. I felt it rush over me from out of nowhere. I looked around at the people dancing and I felt an intense love towards all of them. It was a love that was equally intense towards everyone. It didn't matter

if I knew the person or not, at that moment I felt love towards each person that was more intense than I have ever felt towards anyone.

I'm not sure how long I was standing there. Time seemed irrelevant. As I reflected on the experience I believed that I would have felt the same love towards someone at that moment even if they were attacking me with a knife. The love would have remained because it came from outside both of us.

That experience was my star. Somehow I knew that that love was the meaning of life. To live in that love would be heaven on earth. I chased that star trying to understand it. I wanted to experience it again. I eventually left a lot of the beliefs I had behind me as I started to read about Buddhism, It wasn't long before I decided that I wanted to become a Buddhist. A short time later I had a dream. It was a very realistic dream. It was the kind of dream that stuck with me and left me thinking 'that was more than a dream'.

In the dream I was in a car. It was an old Model-T. The Dalai Lama was driving, and we were driving through a garden on a walking path. I remember turning to the Dalai Lama and saying, "I want to become a Buddhist". He laughed and said, "You are not a Buddhist. You are a Christian". I woke up confused and annoyed. At this point I had become quite angry at Christianity. The Dalai Lama might as well have called me a four-letter word. I was not pleased. But, something about this left me shaken. I couldn't ignore it.

Like the Magi I continued chasing the star, and it was leading

me to unexpected places. Like the Magi I was led to Palestine- not literally, but in terms of the literature I began reading. I picked up the Bible and opened it to the Gospel of Matthew. Herod was there in my mind as well- hoping to find the child to kill him. Originally, I hoped that I would find all sorts of offensive and contradictory material so that I could leave Jesus behind me as I followed the star. But Herod didn't have his way. The child lived. I read through Matthew and when I hit the Sermon on the Mount I was blown away by Jesus. The words were engraving themselves on my soul as I read and I had no ability to resist. Jesus spoke about not judging, about turning the other cheek, about putting away anger, and about loving your enemies. I read about Jesus forgiving those who were unlovable and even loving those who were killing him by asking God to forgive them. Then I reached the first letter of John (4:7-8) where it says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

The star I was chasing was my unexplainable and overwhelming experience of love- and Jesus made sense of that love. Like the magi I had followed the star and it led me to a little child in his mother's arms- Love incarnate.

This room is filled with magi. You have been called from strange places. You have sought happiness in many places. When the pursuit of happiness failed you turned to dulling the pain or boredom. But, there was something that pulled at you- telling you that there is meaning to life. You have felt the pull of the star. Perhaps it was late at night and you had the

overwhelming urge to pray. It might have been joy that overwhelmed you and filled your eyes with tears while watching the sun set. You might have been walking somewhere, or reading a book, or listening to music, when suddenly that something swept over you from out of nowhere. Suddenly the veil is pulled away and the everyday ordinary reality reveals the deeper and more meaningful reality that lives under it. There is meaning. There is truth. And words can barely touch it. You realize that this world is haunted (as the philosopher Charles Taylor would say). It is haunted by another reality.

Maybe you are feeling the familiar tug yet again and it fills you with joy to respond. Maybe you have ignored the tug for a long time. Or, Maybe you are feeling that pull for the first time. Don't ignore it. Follow it. Do anything you possibly can to follow it. Or maybe the better way to say it is, 'give in'. Let go of whatever is preventing you from follow that star. Let its gravity pull you. If you have followed it before but have been distracted, let go and let yourself be drawn. Be drawn to that calm place, where you can be still with that child, leave the worries, leave the work that has to be done, leave the 'just one more thing', Leave your homeland and travel to the baby. Find peace there. AMEN