

Wise Men

Matthew's is often regarded as the most Jewish of the Gospels. He traces the family tree of Jesus only as far back as Abraham, the father of the Jews— unlike Luke who traces it all the way back to the father of all humanity, Adam. Matthew sets out his material with a clear Moses theme, in 5 blocks like the book of Moses, with the sermon on the mount seeming to parallel the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. And in that sermon, is the claim that Jesus has come to fulfil the law of Moses. So why on earth does the Gospel story begin with a bizarre tale about a bunch of Iraqi stargazers?

If you learned of the so-called wise men, as I did, from nativity plays before anything else, it is easy to picture them simply as part of the crowd in Israel that were there. But it is crucially important to realise that these people were not from Israel, they were not children of Abraham, they had no Scripture, no Abrahamic descent, no call to worship in Jerusalem. They are second rate foreigners, not part of the people of God.

It is a story of the so called wise men raises some intriguing questions. The main one being why they were regarded as wise at all. I'm not questioning the wisdom of leaving your comforts, to become nocturnal so you can go off and follow a star. I mean, the arrival of these so called wise men in Jerusalem, to ask a paranoid, violent, tyrant King – where his replacement is being born? Herod was the first century Palestinian version of Mr Burns. That, to me, does not seem very wise.

And so we read on, that Herod calls them aside secretly, and says right – go off, find him, and when you're done – come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him as well. And the so called wise men, say 'Oh okay!' So they arrive, and they bring gifts for Jesus, and then – in order to prevent the so-called wise men, from going back to Herod and spilling the beans, God has to speak to them supernaturally!

Well, having met these so called 'wise men', it comes as little surprise when we read in verse 16 that 'when Herod realised he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious!' Well, wouldn't you be if you were Mr Burns and you'd been outwitted by Homer Simpson?

But why has Matthew included this bizarre little story in his gospel, when it doesn't appear in any of the others? You can be sure that he did not put it there accidentally! So what purpose does it serve?

Perhaps it is to show that although God's people seem to have been waiting expectantly for the Messiah, the King of the Jews to come, actually they did not seem to know what to expect. For one thing, Herod had to ask some biblical scholars where the Messiah was to be born. And it wasn't only the birth of the Messiah that threw people. Throughout his ministry Jesus was not what people expected of a Messiah.

And so Jesus himself says that people will come from the four corners of the earth and take their place in the Kingdom of God, in front of Jewish people – and many Jews will find themselves cast out where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. The

Queen of Sheba would rise up and judge this generation because they could not see what was right under their nose. Matthew even has Jesus praising the faith of a centurion, a nasty horrible Gentile representative of the occupying power, who nevertheless had a faith unlike anything Jesus had encountered in the house of Israel! And then there is the Canaanite woman, praised again because she had shown great faith.

So these astrologers from distant lands, come by their own bizarre religion to see what no Jew seemed able to recognise, even though they had the Scriptures and the expectation for a Messiah to come. Why was it, that the so called wise-men could see and respond to a king who had not been recognised by his own people?

Seeing the wood for the trees

The phrase about not seeing the wood for the trees seems to spring to mind. Why was it that so many people could not see the purposes of God unfolding under their noses? It was not only the details surrounding the birth and childhood that seemed to pass unnoticed, but throughout his ministry – Jesus would constantly be defying the people's expectations of what a Messiah should do. And it meant that, to greater or lesser extents, like Herod – they rejected the true Messiah. Why

Because they allowed prior ideals, prior beliefs, prior commitments, prior achievements, to determine the truth they were able to encounter. If you have committed your life to a political programme, biblically based, passionately spiritual, politically active – the last thing you want is for some bod to pop up and undermine the project that has shaped your identity! And it is as true today as it was then.

Prior commitments and achievements determine the truth that we able to encounter. And this seems to happen at almost every level. My favourite journalist I think is George Monbiot, who writes for the Guardian, and he offers some great careers advice, basing it in journalism.

His advice is to be wary of the careers advice that comes from college. Okay, so you want to work as a journalist in South America. You must first learn to work in a local newspaper, to give you the necessary qualifications and experiences and insights, so that you can then go and follow your dream more realistically.

Of course, by doing this, the advice is that you avoid over-specialisation. "But the truth is that by following the path they suggest, you are becoming a specialist: a specialist in the moronic recycling of what the rich and powerful deem to be news. And after a few years of that, you are good for very little else. ...This career path, in other words, is counter-educational. It teaches you to do what you don't want to do, to be what you don't want to be.

How many times have I heard students about to start work for a corporation claim that they will spend just two or three years earning the money they need, then leave and pursue the career of their choice? How many times have I caught up with those people several years later, to discover that they have acquired a lifestyle, a car and a mortgage to match their salary, and that their initial ideals have faded to the haziest of memories, which they now dismiss as a post-adolescent fantasy? How many times have I watched free people give up their freedom?

It is this precise same principle at work – that prior commitments and achievements shape the truth that we are able or willing to encounter. It is as true in our day as it was in the time of Jesus. And this is just one example. It is an ironic one, given that journalism I thought should be concerned with recognising and disseminating truth ... well, I suppose it depends which paper you read. But there are examples at the smaller level:

Listening to Radio 4 yesterday, there was a debate running about power. And some chap came on who was arguing that those windturbines are a blot on the landscape, and we should simply return to producing coal. There's plenty of it in Britain, and it's the most sensible option. And it sounded like some form of Dimbleby conducting the interview, so he asked – what this chaps career had been, and he replied that he used to be a miner. So Dimbleby pushed him and said, okay – so we burn and burn our coal with no thought whatsoever about Global warming and its effects upon others. And this chap responded, "I don't believe in Global warming, it's all a massive scam, just a big load of rubbish ..." to which the response was, well – you have to say that otherwise your entire position is untenable.

Once again, prior commitments - and it is entirely understandable – but prior commitments determine the truth that we are willing to encounter. To the point where we can no longer see what is right under our noses.

I suppose at the smallest level, I would go right for an example of how this works for children. And I'm horrified to say that I could not think of a single example from my own children! Why? Because there are no prior commitments and achievements, certainly not that are significant enough to cloud the desire for Truth. In fact, it's almost the very opposite. Alice waves a dandelion in the air saying 'it's a daisy'. You tell her it's a dandelion – and if she were a good adult, she would then spend the next half hour arguing with you about it, then not speak to you for a week. But she just switches and says, 'it's a dandelion'. At least, she would say that if she could. And I wonder if that is why Jesus says that we should come to him, and to his kingdom, like children. That is, not allowing prior commitments, and beliefs, and achievements to determine the truth that we encounter.

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, we read the institution of the Lord's Supper. For Matthew, the most Jewish of Gospels, the context is a Passover meal. It was here that the foundational moment of Jewish identity is found, as the people leave Egypt and cross the Red Sea to head for the promised land. In fact, Jesus' name is simply the Greek translation of Joshua, the one who did eventually do this.

And it is here, at communion, that we leave all that is prior. It is here that we repent, that we leave behind our prior achievements or failures, our prior ideals, our prior defeats, it is here that we leave behind all that is prior, it is here that we die. Because it is here that we encounter a new exodus, it is here that experience new life, here that – like the wise men - we follow the light to vulnerability of the living God. And here that we are remade in his image.