

## Wise Men

**On the Sunday before Christmas Day, Fidel ran a quiz which asked among other things if it was true or false that the Wise Men from the East visited Jesus at the stable, or words to that effect, the correct answer was 'false', and as I looked around the church I saw a few surprised looks, surely the Bible says that the three Kings visited Jesus at the stable, that's what the figures on my crib at home have, that's what the Cavalcade last night was all about, surely.**

**Some of you will have heard the fuss made by the press over Christmas about certain comments made by Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Telegraph ran the heading ' Archbishop says nativity 'a legend''. He has been accused of debunking Christianity, attacking the faith, and even according to one blog, calling God a liar.**

**Apparently Dr Williams said that the story of the three Kings is just a legend.**

**So, knowing what the press is like, and because today is the feast of the Epiphany, when the Western Church traditionally remembers the visit of the Wise Men to Jesus, I had a look to see if I could find a transcript of what he actually said, and found that I agree with him. He was answering a question about Christmas cards.**

***"...Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us that there were three of them, doesn't tell us they were kings, doesn't tell us where they came from, it says they're astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire. That's all we're really told so, yes, 'the three kings with the one from Africa' - that's legend"***

**So what does Matthews Gospel say?**

***"Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."***

***And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.***

**'They entered the house' not the stable, and nothing about them being kings, nothing about them being three in number, and nothing about one of them being from Africa. So it looks like that 'Los Reyes Magos' that will have brought the well-behaved children in Spain all their presents this morning are just as real as Father Christmas, who came to Gibraltar last month.**

**So who were these Wise Men? Matthew tells us they were from the East. At the time when Jesus was born, there were four great empires in the world, the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, an Indian Empire and the Chinese Empire. These last three were all East of Israel, but I think we can safely discount India and China, not just because of the enormous distance they would have had to travel but because Matthew also tells us they were 'Magi'. The New Living Translation we read from translates the Greek word 'magoi' as 'Wise Men' other translations use the word 'Magi' from which of course we get the English word 'magic'.**

**The Magi are known to have come from Persia, they were roughly the equivalent of the Levites in Israel, they were the priests, followers of Zoroaster, the Persian prophet, and they were astrologers. In those days of course astrology was not about reading horoscopes telling you that your lucky colour is pink, your lucky number is seven, and not to get into arguments today as that will be counter-productive. Astrology was the method the Persians used to discern the will of their god, and to understand the times. Centuries before, the Prophet Daniel living in exile in Babylon, had been made Rab-mag, the Chief of the Magi.**

**Daniel 5:11 reads: "There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods. During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, this man was found to have insight, understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods. Your predecessor, the king, made him chief over all the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon."**

**There is a story that Daniel founded a sect among the Magi who were entrusted with a messianic vision, and told to look out for the arrival of the King of the Jews. That might be just another legend, but it is true that Jews had a great influence in Persia ever since the captivity in Babylon so - who knows?**

**Anyhow, the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, and went to see King Herod. Big mistake, one of the jobs of Magi in Persia, as Herod must have known, is to identify the next King, they were the King Makers, when one King of Persia died, it was the Magi, using all their secret arts to identify the next King.**

**No wonder Herod was worried, he wasn't even a Jew, and now these 'King makers' from a foreign power were looking for the next King of the Jews. It wasn't just his personal position as King he was worried about, but this was also a threat to his boss – Caesar. So as you all know he ordered the massacre of male children up to two years old. Because of this fact and other evidence many scholars calculate that Jesus must have been around one year old at the time, and living in a house in Bethlehem. Bad news for Christmas card manufacturers.**

**We also know from the Bible that the Magi brought gifts for the new born King, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

**It was of course, the custom then as now, to bring gifts to new born royalty, but whether they knew it or not, these gifts were special.**

**Joseph and Mary will certainly have welcomed the gold, before long they would have to flee to Egypt for their lives, and a little bit of gold would have been very useful. God provided, as he always does for his children. Doing God's will had not been easy for Joseph and Mary, and it wasn't about to get any easier, but their Father in heaven knew what was coming, and gave the family everything they needed. But the gold meant a lot more than just material provision, it was a gift reserved for Royalty, it meant this baby was recognised by the King Makers of Persia as the future King of Israel.**

**Gold also stands in the Bible for divinity, it was used to cover the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple, the streets are made of gold in the New Jerusalem, whether they knew it or not the Wise Men had presented their gifts not just to another king but to the King of kings, to the Son of God himself.**

**These gifts were prophetic, they spoke of who Jesus really was.**

**Frankincense was the incense used by the priesthood to offer worship to God, Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi which was the tribe set aside as the Jewish priesthood, so again whether they realised it or not, the Wise Men from the East were declaring with their gift of Frankincense that not only was this baby destined to be King, but also to be a priest, and as we read in the book of Hebrews, the great High Priest. Jesus had been born not just to bring God to men as King, but men to God as Priest.**

**Gold for a King, frankincense for a Priest, Joseph and Mary would have been delighted, so what about the Myrrh?**

**In our reading from Isaiah earlier we heard the prophecy that people from afar *"will bring ... the wealth of many lands. Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshipping the LORD."* (Isa 60:6)**

**A prophecy perhaps but where is the Myrrh?**

**Myrrh, like frankincense is an aromatic spice grown in the East, but unlike frankincense it is not used for worship in the Temple, Myrrh is used for death.**

**When Jesus was on the cross one of the Roman soldiers offered him a drink mixed with myrrh, and when we read that the women went to embalm his body on the Sunday morning after Good Friday, it was myrrh they took with them. Myrrh was used for embalming the dead. In bringing myrrh to the infant Jesus the Wise Men from the East were prophesying that this child, this King, this High priest, was born to die.**

**All of us are born to die of course, and maybe this is why the Magi included this gift, as a reminder of the ever-present reality of death in the midst of life, but it was also a prophecy.**

**The very fact of these Gentile men worshipping the Jewish Messiah is also a prophecy, they represent you and me , by their very presence they declare that this child is not just King of the Jews, but King of all people, Jew or Gentile, he is not just hope for Israel but hope for the world.**

**Without the death of Jesus 33 years later not only would there have been no Christmas, there would have been no hope. The world would have no hope. You and I would have no hope. Christmas is often portrayed as a time of hope, and as we enter a new year we do so with hope, we resolve to do things differently, better, but it is not Christmas that can give us strength and hope, despite the Christmas cards, and carols, best wishes, it is not Christmas that can give us strength and hope, it is Easter. The future death and resurrection of this little child sitting on his mother's knee wondering what all the fuss is about and who these strange men bringing smelly stuff into the room are, is the only thing that gives not just Christmas but our very lives any meaning.**