



THE NEW SHOFAR

Take the Light of Christ and shine in the world's darkness

Isaiah 60:1-6 - Matthew 2:1-12

epiphany

Why the three wise men are important

One of the great things about Matthew's Gospel is the way he included Gentiles into the genealogy of Jesus. His message is clear: the saving love of God extends beyond national and moral barriers to engage all men and women with divine love. These Magi probably came from Persia and in the eyes of the Jews were idolaters who led people astray by their teaching of human wisdom rather than the primacy of heavenly revelation. They were attacked by the prophets — especially by Isaiah and Ezekiel because they understood the world as being under the control of the stars and the heavenly constellations. They were astronomers.

The story of the Exodus was not only an account of the deliverance of Israel from physical slavery in Egypt but the freedom of men and women from the slavery of ideas produced by men wise in the ways of this earth but ignorant in the ways of God. And yet these are the very men who are called to give witness

God and science are not in opposition and God works through science in opening up the minds of men and women to His wonderful ways in creation. The danger is science can become more attractive because of its "wow" factor and replace God as the Creator and the One sustaining all things. Faith has nothing at all to fear from science

to the great things God is doing in the birth of this messiah-child in Bethlehem. They were following the science of their own time and it led them to head off in search of what God was revealing to them in the star. They were open to the divine and it was that openness that led them to the Messiah. The wisdom and insight they sought from a star they found in a manger in Bethlehem instead.

The beautiful irony of it all

What Matthew is saying is that every human hope, dream and expectation is fulfilled in this Messiah. The expectations of Israel as found in the Hebrew scriptures, as well as the expectations of the unbelievers, people who pursue idols and philosophies, can only be fully satisfied in God. Herein lies the irony. These despised pagan scientists are drawn to Israel in their search for Wisdom and the meaning of life. They traverse long distances and hostile environments in their search for Truth and find it in a Bethlehem stable. Those who have the Truth proclaimed to them by the prophets and by what God has done for them in their history, sit at home in their Temple and the places of government oblivious to what is being revealed to them by the God they profess to worship and serve. Herod even goes so far as to plot ways to protect his own position of power, seeking to have the child executed!

What a great message this must have been for Matthew's own community of believers. By the time this Gospel was written, the Gentiles were being accepted into the Church and this became a target of attack by the leaders of Judaism. Surely God could not want the Gentiles in His Kingdom! In the narrative of the Magi the answer is clear: no one is excluded from God's grace. Anyone who pursues the Truth and is open to God's revelation, will find God, for everyone comes under divine love.

Nothing can stop the amazing plans of God

Matthew has very little in the way of a Christmas story, leaving the details and specifics to Luke. For him the most important thing is the meaning of the birth of the messiah Jesus. In his genealogy he has included Gentiles and now he has foreigners, Magi, travelling great distances to worship this new king. There is something quite powerful in this simple recounting of what happened. For him it means that nothing is impossible for God. Even more, God surmounts all barriers – in the case of Jesus born of the young virgin Mary and now the presence of the Magi – representing significant racial limitations, moral barriers and the difficulties of history (a Jewish king born under Roman imperial rule). Despite all of the problems, the promises God made long ago are now starting to be fulfilled. Mary may well have been going against the established moral code of her day but was reassured in her actions through the grace of God. The Magi had no idea as to the promises made to the Jews and yet they had travelled vast distances, across hostile lands in order to worship this king. For our evangelist, this is where the grace of God is shown to be the most important element in human life. We are given the example of Herod as a contrast. He is a powerful king. He is rich, influential and well able to determine his own future and the future of his subjects. And yet, for all of this, he is unable to change the plans of God. While the great and mighty Caesar is reigning supreme in faraway Rome, God is raising up the King of Kings in remote Bethlehem. The Scribes, Priests and the *people of Jerusalem* are so busy searching the scriptures to find their own hopes being fulfilled and unfolding around them and yet miss the great and wonderful work of God.

We too are invited to find the Messiah

As we read through the remainder of this Gospel, the same message will come back time and time again. We are invited to choose God as the foundation of our lives. It is then by walking in his ways (as mapped out for us by Jesus) that we will be given the wisdom we need to find his enduring peace, love, mercy, forgiveness, healing and the never ending opportunity for new life and new beginnings. We will in Christ overcome all difficulties and obstacles to life. Where do we find these divine gifts? He is to be found in all things in our lives. This is the Christmas message. He is not the Jesus was born so long ago but that Jesus, having been born in Bethlehem, is now alive in all peoples. New life, a fresh beginning and alternative directions are available to all believers, who like the Magi, make the effort and sacrifice to search for him and live in union with him.

As ever, choices need to be made as we begin our new year in Christ

One significant message from Matthew in this story is how with the arrival of the messiah decisions need to be made. He is to be accepted or rejected. The Gentiles here accept him while the Jewish leaders of the time reject him. The challenge then is for the Church of Matthew's time (and for the Church of every time) – have faith and follow Jesus or reject God's invitation and pursue alternative pathways to life.

This is not meant to be some wishy washy kind of Epiphany encouragement. It highlights the ease with which even passionate and spiritually driven people can miss what God is demanding of them. The Jews sat comfortably in their Temple in Jerusalem, confident that when God sent His Messiah, they would be ready and they would acknowledge him. The reality is, only shepherds, Gentiles and animals were there to join the angels in song. Today in the Church is no different. It is a danger to reject the call to repent, to listen to God; a mistake to think what we are doing now is all God wants us to be doing and reflects the way God wants us to be acting. The God who is ever new is constantly calling faith communities to a life of transformation in the Spirit. The new wine of God (grace) will require new wine skins (the way we live, give witness to and proclaim the Gospel in the world). If we and our faith lives remain unchanged and our pastoral and evangelical methods remain the same as they have always been, then maybe we too risk being like the unsuspecting Jewish leaders sitting comfortably in their Temple.

Here we have an important theme of this Gospel—the need to be open to God drawing us off in new ways, with fresh insights so that the people of our own time can come to find His Messiah. In chapter five Jesus will express this need in his image of the new wine needing new wine skins. There is no reason why today would be any different. Pursue to Truth, live in God and be open to the Spirit and we will find ourselves as being a New Creation in Christ.