

The new who knew

5 1 14

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face-to-face.

Our text today may be found in Luke chapter 2 and verse 13:

'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'

words of prophesy about Jesus which Simeon spoke to Mary and Joseph while he held the baby in his arms as they stood there in the Temple.

Tonight is Twelfth Night. Tomorrow, the twelfth day after Christmas, is the feast of the Epiphany which we are celebrating this morning. You know the story well. Wise men from the East in search of a birth. In Jerusalem, Herod points them on to Bethlehem. They go and there they find the baby Jesus and present him with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then they go home.

A simple story, a beautiful story. And this morning, I'd like to focus on just two aspects of what we know so well:

- who knew and
- how they knew

Who knew, in this case, are the three wise men. Actually, three is an assumption given Matthew fails to mention how many there are of them but it is reasonable to assume that there were just three of them given there were only three gifts. One thing they were not was kings. Nice idea but an exaggeration of their status. The actual Greek word to describe them, μάγος (magos), comes from the Old Persian, word magus from which we have the English word mage. A mage, and its plural form, magi, refers to a member of the ancient Persian priestly caste skilled in Oriental magic and astrology. Well dodgy? Probably not! But what is interesting is that these three men were uncircumcised Gentiles. They were not Jews. They were not part of God's Chosen People, the Children of Israel. That these foreigners should know about the birth of our Messiah, that they should want to travel westward in search of the child, is a turning point in the history of our faith. It is a sign that the prophecy that Simeon will utter in less than forty days time has already come true even before he even spoke it! That in and through his Son, Jesus, God is making himself known to everyone, not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. It is a universal truth that Paul, Saul of Tarsus, will take to heart and make his mission in life. And, thank God, that is why ultimately we are all here today.

Secondly, how did they know? Because they were astrologers, astronomers who intimately knew the night sky. Now what they saw we can't know for sure but whatever they saw had to have occurred before 4BC because that, as we heard last week, was the date of Herod's death. As a boy, I grew up in the East End of London in Halley Road (*as in 'alley' which is the way Cockneys living around there at the time pronounced Halley*) and I'd love to think that what they saw was

Halley's comet. Probably, sadly, not given that it appeared around 12/11 BC. The star may have been the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn which occurred around 7BC. Neat idea given Jupiter, the largest of the planets in our solar system, symbolised kingship and Saturn was associated with the Jews. But truth is we don't know what the phenomenon was they saw, simply that they observed it and interpreted it as a sign that a king had been born, a king who was special. There was a shared expectation at the time – that a king would be born in Judea who would transform the world. So off they set to find him because their knowledge made them aware something special was going on and they wanted to be a part of the action !

What, then, can we learn from the visit of the wise men, from the journey of the Magi in search of the boy born to be king ? That God can be known by all of us. There is nothing to stop us coming to a new understanding of God provided we have our eyes open to see, our ears open to hear and our hearts open to respond. But we can chose not to: hard-hearted, we can be blind to God's love and deaf to his voice calling us home. Choice is the consequence of our being made in the image of God. So what are you going to choose ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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