



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church January 4, 2015

Matthew 2: 1-12

In his short story "The Star", Arthur C Clarke imagines a Jesuit scientist on a deep space mission to the remnants of an exploded star. The astronauts explore a planet around the star and the remains of a civilisation that was wiped out when the star exploded. Doing the calculations do determine the age of the civilisation and the time of the explosion, the Jesuit cries out "Why Lord did these people have to die to provide the sign for the Magi and Bethlehem?"

Yet another of the long line of imagined explanations for the star that led the Magi to Judea and Jerusalem. Was it a supernova, a planetary conjunction, Jupiter and Saturn in a particular astrological constellation or a comet? According to Matthew's account, something they had seen 'at its rising' prompted these men to travel all the way from Persia to Jerusalem, convinced that it was a sign that a new king had been born for Judea. Matthew's phrase 'at its rising' has led to this mystery of what had the Magi seen? However, as I said last week, the real mystery is why, given the ridicule of astrology in scripture, Matthew crafted this story that seems to say that astrology is capable of correctly prophesying the birth of Jesus? Perhaps the clue lies in reading and accepting all of Matthew's story and not just those parts that conveniently point to a natural explanation. This object that had a rising also 'went before them' and 'stopped'. Rather than some mystery about what natural astronomical event prompted the Magi, we could instead look for the intervention of God to show the Creator announcing Good News via creation.

The first step in reading scripture is to realise what it is that we are reading. Prophecy? Poetry? History? Theology? Religious story? The Gospels are all of this and more because the writers were inventing a new form of writing. What we have in the Gospels is a genre unique in antiquity; more than biography of a hero and yet not just history, more than religious text and yet not rhetoric. To take one phrase out of a story and try to build meaning without acknowledging the whole is to deny purpose to the author and to prejudge an absence of God from the narrative. Matthew's Magi are no less the work of God than Luke's shepherds. No one tries to find a 'natural' cause for the shepherds coming down from the fields – they saw angels. Why then do people try to fit a natural star into the story of the Magi? Isn't the God who sent a message to the Magi in a dream also capable of sending a sign in the sky in a way that those same men would interpret it?

Some Medieval writers believed the Magi's star to be an angel – a more likely interpretation for a Gospel story. Particularly for gospel birth story. Matthew is here crafting a story for the purposes of his version of the Gospel, and for the instruction of people in his community to meet their needs. Scholar's best guess at the origins of the Gospel of Matthew point to Antioch in Syria – a place more Persian than Judean. In an environment of hostility between the local synagogue and the new faith of The Way, it is quite natural for Matthew to give us a story that shows that the local Gentile culture is more willing and able to identify Jesus as the Christ than the Jews with all their history and scripture.

Rather than a mystery as to why the Magi in the birth stories, we have an example of the ability and willingness of God to find a way to speak into any culture to bring about revelation and worship. Where the chief priests and the scribes were blinded by all the history and scripture that was supposed to light up their faith, the Magi saw a light in the darkness of the sky that they were willing to follow. Where the chief priests and the scribes were locked into a mind-set of God speaking only to them about their issues and leadership, the Magi were open to creation supplying messages about all of creation – the same sky shone over Judea as it did over Persia. The Epiphany message from Matthew is that this God who sends messages is obviously not confined to Judea or to Jews. The king of the Jews is to be worshipped by all, even star watchers from the East.

A few years back, I was working as the Lay Assistant for the Torquay congregation. I received a phone call asking for a funeral service, not realising that the caller meant to call the Anglican Church. The confusion remained until the notice went into the paper. After sorting this out with the Anglican Vicar, it was agreed that I do the service as I as prepared and she was busy. After introducing myself at the start by pointing out that I was a Uniting Church preacher here in this Anglican Church, a number of the relative commented after the service on the multiple denominational nature of what we had done. One said it was fine, "After all, you are just branches of the same head office aren't you!"

Much as Matthew had done in the story of the Magi, here was an example of how people outside the faith can often see the truth better than those within who are blinded by tradition and dogma. The chief priests and the scribes sneered at the idea of studying the skies and relied on scripture for God's revelation, and yet here they have that revelation but do nothing with it. They don't even offer to accompany the Magi to Bethlehem! We claim to be people of scripture and revelation and yet so many outside the church are out there ahead of us in issues of justice and mercy, worshipping the God made known in creation, as Paul wrote to the Romans, while so many in the church sit, holding on to the idea that God loves only them and those like them. Matthew's story of the Magi cuts both ways; it is not just a story to show that those thought to be outside the grace of God

can be inside, but also that those who think themselves inside need to open their eyes to a bigger understanding of the grace of God.

Whatever the sign was that the Magi saw, it was more than an astronomical event. It was a sign that led them to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem and then to a house. And it was part of an experience of God that led them to worship and to hear a message of warning. Matthew wanted to tell his community to look outside the expected places of God to see the path to the Christ. The worship practices of Israel and the ideas of holiness and selection were no longer the way to God. The Christ has come in a small town, proclaimed by angels and worshipped by foreigners; God has broken into the world and hope and faith are no longer confined to one nation or one expectation. Here is the Christ, proclaimed by creation, a child and yet a king for all.