
You're a Star

Matthew 2.1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 1 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Those of you who know the story of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe will know that in England we love Turkish Delight. The advert for Fry's Turkish Delight always surrounded the sweets with mist, and spice, and potion, and sabre-shaped scimitar swords, with a hint of distant onion shaped domes and sands in the distance. It ended with the words 'full of Eastern promise'. The story of the coming of the wise men is just like this: full of Eastern promise. I'm going to look at the story in three parts: what we learn in the East, what we learn in Jerusalem, and what we learn in Bethlehem.

So, first: what we learn in the East. We learn that God makes himself known to those outside the regular circle of his acquaintance. What is particularly striking is not just that gentiles are among those who come to worship Jesus: according to Matthew, these magi are the first to worship Jesus, after he is born Jesus is born under the very noses of the political and social and religious elite of Israel, but none of them seem remotely aware of what is going on. Those who make the discovery are the outcast and unclean, in Luke's account, that's to say the shepherds, and the distant and uncircumcised, in Matthew's account, that's to say the wise men.

The wise men are able to see the working of God in the world, in the form of the unusual star. So here we learn on the one hand that God does work by shifting the heavenly furniture around, and on the other hand that outsiders to the faith may have at least as much access to this kind of action of God as the regulars. The beginning of this story is a clear statement that God does communicate with those who are seeking him, even if they are separated from the company of the faithful by distance or tradition. God doesn't belong to the Christians today, any more than he belonged to the Jews in the time of Herod.

I once went on holiday in North Africa and travelled down to the Sahara desert. I took a camel ride out to the dunes and hired a guide to come with me. When I reached the viewpoint I got out my camera and composed classy photographs the scene from various angles. Just as I began to think about moving on I realized that I hadn't seen my guide for quite a while. Walking around a corner I spotted him, semi-prostrate, making his prayerful oblation to God. I was humbled, realizing how I and he had respectively spent the previous 15 minutes. How could I say that this man was far from the kingdom of God?

But now we move to the second part of the story: what we learn in Jerusalem. What we learn in Jerusalem is the other half of what this story tells us about wise sages from other traditions. The first part of the story told us that the magi could discover God in their deep and earnest searching and their honest and faithful researching. This second part of the story tells us that although their careful conclusions did indeed bring them to Israel, their journey took them to Jerusalem and not to Bethlehem. And this perhaps epitomizes what this story has to tell us about what we might call the faith of the non-Christian. The faith of the non-Christian may indeed get to Jerusalem. But it is not clear that it gets to Bethlehem.

In other words one can logically deduce that there must be a God, that God is revealed or in some way disclosed by his activity in creation, in the stars, in minute details, grand designs or curious accidents. These may investigations may indeed get one to the God of Israel centered on Jerusalem. But the whole point of this story is to demonstrate that the God fully revealed in Jesus Christ is centered not on Jerusalem but on Bethlehem. It is only when the wise men got to Jerusalem and were shown the scripture that directed them to Bethlehem that they moved from being general God-fearers to worshiping Christians.

So this story shows the possibilities but also the limits of a faith that is founded on personal discovery, investigation, and, to use a contemporary word, science. There's a great deal in the news about matters such as intelligent design, and there is always interest in whether one can ever prove the existence of God. While these matters will always be interesting for Christians, it's hard to see how they will be our primary concern. The reason is that they can get us to Jerusalem but not to Bethlehem. In other words they can get us to a point

where we conclude there may well be some kind of a God who could perhaps be personal and probably has some kind of purpose for the universe. But they never get us anywhere the God Christians actually believe in, the God who longs to be in relationship with us, the God who in Christ lays down his life for us, the God who at Christmas comes among us in tiny, fleshly, vulnerable form as a human baby.

We learn two other things in Jerusalem, at this second stage of the story of the wise men. The first is that if we are to be leaders, as these Eastern sages were leaders of their own people, then we have to be able to recognize when we have made a mistake. To admit you have made a mistake is not the equivalent of saying you realize you are a terrible leader and should be replaced; it is to affirm that learning is a feature of every organization and that as a leader you are a part of that process of learning, not exempt from it. We live in a culture that has a myth of the leader-savior, who takes over an institution and does no wrong. We need to say this nonsense. It is not only factually untrue but has little to do with the Christian emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation. Life isn't about not making mistakes, but about what you do when you've made them.

I once heard a leading British politician interviewed on a radio phone-in program. He had opposed the British entry into the European Community in the 1970s, but 20 years later he became a European Commissioner, one of the bureaucrats who run the whole European enterprise. The caller said to him, 'How can you represent an organization you used to oppose?' The politician replied, 'When I realize I have made a mistake, I change my mind. What do you do?' The caller had nothing to say. The wise men realized they had made a mistake. Three times in this story they show both leadership and humility. They do so at the beginning by setting out across many miles to find the new king. They do so at the end by bowing down to worship him. But perhaps most of all they do so in the middle by accepting they have made a mistake.

The last thing we learn in Jerusalem at this second stage of the story is that Jesus is a political threat to the status quo. This is a particularly important thing to remember a few days after getting very excited about a tiny baby. Just as parents a few days after a birth realize it's not so much about the wonder of birth and tiny life as it is about dirty diapers and sleep deprivation, so it's good for Christians a few days after the birth of Jesus to remember it's not so much about the timeless beauty of Christmas as it is about the way Jesus turns the world upside-down. And turning the world upside down makes the mighty who are on their seats very angry.

It may help to have a bit of background on the manner in which the Roman Emperor ran his empire. Rather than dominate and overrun his subject people, he creamed off perhaps 5% of the population to act as retainers. These people would get significant benefits in terms of wealth, prestige, and power. All that was required in return was loyalty to Rome. Thus at the time of Jesus' birth, Rome could afford not to rule Judaea directly. Instead it simply controlled the people and raised taxes through a vassal king, Herod the Great. Herod died shortly after Jesus was born, and his sons had neither his authority nor his skill. So following Herod's death Rome took to administering the province directly, by installing a governor.

Nonetheless they kept on the various hierarchies of retainers to act as intermediaries between them and the largely Jewish population. And well they might, for, as my father-in-law is fond of saying, 'Why keep dogs and bark yourself?' The Roman governors had found a formula that meant they could control the province, and meanwhile acquire considerable wealth for themselves, not by suppressing the people with military force, but by manipulating those among the population who sought wealth, prestige and power. That is why in the gospels there are only occasional encounters and confrontations with Roman authorities and soldiers. Most of the disputes are with Rome's stooges – those whose obedience to Rome demonstrated they had lost all sight of being God's holy people. At Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, they attempt to wipe out any hint of a rival king. A generation later in Jerusalem, they finally get their man.

And so to the third and last part of the story of the wise men. What do we learn in Bethlehem? Already we have learned a lot. We have learned about the way God reveals himself to those outside the Jewish and then Christian faith. We have learned about the difference between science and revelation. We have learned about how leaders make some of their most important gestures when they are prepared to acknowledge they have made a mistake. And we have learned about the ways in which the birth of Jesus constituted a political threat to the Jewish and Roman authorities in Jerusalem. Finally, in Bethlehem, we discover where we fit into the story.

Our place in the story of the wise men is to be the star. The star gains the wise men's attention. The star continues to point toward Bethlehem even when the so-called wise men think they know better and head toward Jerusalem. The star hovers over the place where the baby lies. Our role is to be this star.

It may be that you are trying to bring up a family and encourage wayward children to take seriously the claims of the Christian faith. It may be that you are striving for justice to be brought into the courtrooms or legislatures or public spaces of this town, state, this country, or much further afield. It may be that you are acutely aware of your powerlessness to change the flow of events, to persuade a partner not to break up the family or to encourage a friend not to give up on a long cherished dream. Your role is to be the star. Your role is to live your life in such a way that people are interested not so much in you as in the joyful reality to which your life is pointing. Your role is to keep pointing to that joyful reality even when those whose attention you long to attract are busy or uninterested or exploring blind alleys. Your role is to be still pointing to the joyful reality when the moment comes when those whose hearts are restless in Jerusalem start wondering again about where the joyful reality is really to be found. Remember, stars shine most brightly at night, when the way forward is hardest to see.

Your role is not to be Jesus, miraculously changing everything for ever. Your role is not to be Herod, deeply threatened by any development that might shift you from the center of the story. Your role is not even to be the wise men, seeking truth on the edges of God's ways. Your role is to shine the light on the humble but transforming reality of Jesus, God with us. Whether people, wise or foolish, notice your shining light, is not necessarily your department. Your department is making sure that light is shining, making sure that everything you think and speak and do is pointing to the transforming humility of the manger. Your job is to ensure one thing: that you're a star.