

Sermon on Wednesday 13 January 2021

by Rev. Bill Church

We are all very familiar with Christmas cards and nativity plays featuring the Three Kings and we love them. But, of course, you won't find them in the Gospels.

Matthew, and only Matthew, tells of a visit by an unspecified number of Magi.

Endless debates have raged about what Magi were, about the actuality of the story, about the logistics of their journey, about the astronomy lying behind the star, and about why they were unwise enough to tell King Herod.

I don't think any of this would have troubled Matthew. He wanted to say something about the acknowledgement, the epiphany, of the child born in Bethlehem.

We don't usually have two Gospel readings in one service, but contrast Matthew's story of the Magi with Luke's account of the visit of the shepherds.

The shepherds were Jews and locals; the Magi were Gentiles and from far away.

The shepherds were pointed to the stable by the angels with unmistakable detail; The Magi had to work out for themselves what the star meant.

The shepherds were poor and unregarded; The Magi were rich enough to travel and significant enough to be received at court.

The shepherds were unlettered; the Magi were learned.

The Magi left valuable gifts; whatever Christina Rossetti wrote in her hymn "In the bleak midwinter", the shepherds brought no gifts but left glorifying and praising God to all within range, while the Magi left quietly by another route.

So, when and why did the Magi become the Three Kings? The earliest Christians were hesitant about portraying any human figures, but the first known representations of the Epiphany feature men with Persian headgear, not crowns.

Interestingly, the Franks casket, which dates from 7th century England when the Anglo-Saxons were hovering between Christianity and paganism, has carvings of scenes, mostly pagan and just one Christian – and that is the Epiphany with three men in Persian headgear.

But by the 10th Century, art from western Europe was portraying kings. And they were given names - Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar - and were said to come from the three points of the known world: the Mediterranean, the orient and Africa.

And why? By that time, the church was all Gentile, and was the main repository of learning, so it was not news that learned Gentiles acknowledged Christ; but there were other people who really mattered, who ought to be paying homage to Christ; and the people who really mattered were no longer stargazers but rulers -kings.

And Christianity was no longer geographically confined to the east, but had spread to regions even the Magi had not known of.

Hence kings from all the corners of the world. That was a bit naughty as biblical exposition, but seems good theological sense.

And, to move forward another 10 centuries, who now are the people who really matter who ought to be paying homage to Christ? Well, you can make your own choice but the shortlist might include... national power brokers (not now kings but presidents and autocrats), corporate moguls from finance or technology, Nobel prize-winners to represent science, sports stars and media personalities.

Let us pray that in 2021 THEY will be queuing up with precious gifts for the Christ child, even if nativity plays and Christmas cribs will still have the traditional figures we love so much.