

Gospel: Matthew 2: 1-12

The myth of the magi and why their journey is important to us today

As some of you may know, this week sees the start of the church season of Epiphany. Thursday is the 12th day of Christmas and it marks the official end to the festive season for many Christians. The Twelfth Night (or Day of Epiphany) also traditionally marks a visit to the baby Jesus by three Kings, or Wise Men or the Magi, as they are variously called.

Some of you may remember one of our Soul Food services two or three years ago, where we discussed the Epiphany, so I apologise if some of you have heard before bits of what I say this morning. I also apologise for spoiling the plot of every school Nativity play that you've ever seen.

It is believed that the historical facts behind the story of the Three Kings are very different to the myth that we see portrayed on Christmas cards.

Let me explain.

Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers to mention the Magi. He reports that they came "from the east" to worship the "king of the Jews". But the gospel never mentions the number of Magi, so it's just an assumption that there were three, based on the statement that they brought three gifts.

Traditional nativity scenes depict three kings visiting the infant Jesus on the night of his birth, accompanied by shepherds and angels, but this is probably an artistic convention allowing the two separate scenes of the Adoration of the Shepherds on the birth night and the later Adoration of the Magi, combined for convenience.

The Three 'Kings' were from the east and, while there is some conjecture about this, they probably journeyed from the Parthian Empire, which ruled in Asia at the same time that the Roman Empire ruled over the Mediterranean region. The people of Israel had been

exiled to Parthia in the past; many had stayed in the kingdom and had assumed positions of prominence and power.

So it's likely that the Magi were not conventional kings in their own right but were powerful members of the Parthian ruling class and were actually looking for a new king for their empire and, hearing that Christ was a direct descendant of King David, who they felt connected to, they were drawn to find the child, believing that he was also a distant relative of the Parthian royal dynasty. Are you still with me?

A typical Parthian caravan was big and, since the Magi were high officials of the Parthian government, they would have travelled with a substantial escort of Parthian soldiers to guarantee their protection. Their caravan is unlikely to have been three lonely camels but probably had over 10,000 armed men, servants, cooks and 1,000 camels.

Arriving in Jerusalem, many people – including Herod – would have feared that this caravan was an invasion force coming to besiege the city and start a new Roman-Parthian war. Rome and Parthia had fought over this area in the recent past, and Herod feared, with a new born king in his midst, it would give the common people motivation to rebel against the Roman government and join forces with Parthia.

The Magi visited Jesus several months after his birth. Matthew states that this visit of the Magi took place in a **house** when Jesus was old enough to be called “a young child”. When they avoided seeing Herod on their return, the frightened Roman ruler became “furious” and vented his pent-up rage by murdering all male children in Bethlehem under the age of two, suggesting that it was up to 24 months after Jesus was born that the Magi actually visited.

The gifts from the Magi would have made Jesus' family very wealthy. It takes financial resources to travel. When God warned Joseph to flee to Egypt quickly, he had the wealth on hand to afford a rapidly arranged, indefinite stay in a foreign nation. Either Joseph was not a poor carpenter, or these funds came from the gifts of the Magi.

There is also a theory that Jesus' substantial financial resources, are later implied by the fact that he and his large band of disciples travelled for years without any visible means of support, which backs up the assumption that the initial gifts given to Jesus by the Magi supported him throughout his entire ministry.

So, in short, the Magi were probably ambassadorial politicians and not kings; they travelled as part of a huge caravan, covering 1,000 miles at walking pace in difficult conditions and could well have taken two years to reach their destination. That's a far cry from our Christmas card version of the story.

T S Elliot famously wrote his poem *Journey of the Magi* about this very different reality.

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.*

But, whichever version you choose to believe, there is a reason why the Three Kings or Magi or Wise Men – whatever we call them – are included as part of God's Word. They set out on a journey. They know what they are seeking; they are looking for a king. Despite hardships on the way, despite losing their sense of direction at times, despite meeting unsafe people who try to distract them, they find what they are looking for. They find their king. In fact, they find the King of Kings. And they change direction as a result and go home by another way.

Does any of that sound familiar? Ever had a similar experience. Ever sought a goal – maybe a God-given goal – and found the journey tough? Maybe you've sought God and found the whole journey of faith tough?

Our personal journeys are as tough as the journey of the Magi, but sometimes and often, we find something significant at the end of our travels.

We forget sometimes that Jesus, whose birth we celebrated a few days ago, spent many years on his own journey. He grew up in a small Jewish family, becoming wiser and stronger, learning a trade, waiting for his moment; waiting for the pieces of the bigger picture to fall into place before he entered the waters of the Jordan, where the Holy Spirit descended on him and he began his work.

Christ knew, and his spirit knows, what a journey is about. God knows what each of our personal journeys is like. And, as he was with the Three Kings, he is with us every step of the way and helps us reach our goals. And he makes us rich, in a way that isn't always about valuable spices or gold. Amen

Forbes Mutch

Lay Leader of Worship