

Jesus and people of other faiths (5)

Matthew 2:1-12

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

5. The Magii and Jesus

This Lent series has looked at Jesus in relation to people of other faiths, as portrayed in the Gospels. We know from independent historical evidence that the Roman Empire and surrounding regions contained people of many different cultural and religious backgrounds. The Judaism of Jesus had its own internal diversity with its Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and the Essenes who counted John the Baptist among their followers. The Samaritans were an ethnic group whose religion evolved from the Israelite religion of the ancient northern kingdom which was destroyed seven centuries before Jesus' coming. Today, as it was then, the lands to the Eastern side of the Mediterranean are places where people of different languages, cultures and faiths rub shoulders. In times passed they have fought each other, taken turns to dominate each other, fought together against common invaders, and despite the terrible conflict we still see there, they have learned to live together with their differences, and have a lot to teach us in the West, where one religion has dominated for far too long, and is now having to get used to being a religious minority among other religious minorities in a world colonised not by political but global economic empires of different kinds with secular material consumerism as the dominant religious world view.

But where else could we conclude our investigation except with the story of Jesus's birth, related to us by Matthew?

The Magii, who visited at the time of his birth were most likely from Persia, as the Greek word is derived from the Persian word, denoting an influential priestly caste for whom astrology was a high art practiced in the service of the royal court. To them the timing of earthly events was believed to be written in the stars, belief flourishing across all religious and cultural boundaries, but it held a special role in the Persian Zoroastrian religion.

The Magii were from another Empire with a different language, history and culture. They represent the whole world beyond what was known and familiar, either in Judaism or under Roman imperial rule. They are portrayed as paying homage to this child, whom the heavens foretell to be of high importance for them in their different society far away to the East of Palestine.

It's the first assertion in the Gospel that Jesus is a child for all nations, for all faiths.

The Magii offer gifts which represent things whose meaning will be transformed in being received by this child. Gold still is a symbol of economic values, frankincense is a symbol of worship, myrrh a symbol of healing. The teller of this story about Jesus is inviting its hearers to see this child's life in the light of things that will be transformed by his presence – material things we value, the way we worship God, the place and priority we give to healing in our lives. In these things made visible at the outset of his life, this prototype, this earliest interfaith encounter touches innocently on key issues in the bringing in of the kingdom of God. It's a 'watch this space' story. In a way, it's a message to us here and now, to beware of our instinctive tendency to regard people of other religious convictions as rivals to be competed with, enemies to be defeated, or merely poor wrong-headed creatures in need of correction.

The Holy family welcomes and accepts the Magii regardless of their beliefs, accepts their homage and gifts, without knowing what sort of difference it will make to their lives. No conditions are laid upon the welcome offered by Mary and Joseph, although they would have had every right to be cautious and protective of this special child.

The Magii, have come searching for the truth behind a star, began their local search where they would habitually start, at the centre of regional power, Herod's court.

But once they have found their destination, they return by another route, dispensing themselves from any obligation to collude with a ruler whose intention was far from being what he declared. They were open to the truth, open to be changed by what they learn as they go, ready to be surprised by revelation in an unexpectedly poor quarter of the world. Their faith in the divine may be different, but it is nonetheless recognisable faith. Time and time again we've seen Jesus remarking on the faith of people he encounters who do not belong to his own religious culture. He sees what is good in them as people. And we must learn from the examples we have witnessed in this series.

In healing the demoniac, Jesus doesn't criticise the poverty and lack of sophistication in the attitude and approach taken to the sufferer. He passes no comment on the belief that prevails. He does what is urgently necessary to engage a deranged man in a healing conversation that can restore his sanity. Jesus acts with faith in what God can do, using reason, imagination and spiritual sensitivity towards someone who is deeply

suffering, to achieve wholeness and new life. And that's vital whenever healing comes into the picture in relationship between people of different faith and culture. Belief that God wants to bless people drives Jesus to action.

In the story of the Centurion, we see that together with the need for healing, comes the need to recognise that one's own power and authority, beliefs are inadequate, unfit for purpose, 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief', the need to recognise that the One alone worthy of worship is above and beyond all that we are or can conceive of - in other words, dialogue about faith starts wherever there is humble acknowledgement that God is greater than our understanding and our beliefs.

The story of the woman at the well showed us that exchange and dialogue, seeking common ground, accepting differences, facing hurts and prejudices between people of different faith is a necessary part of discipleship. It begins with the initiative of Jesus, with God himself. It's a journey on which we're led into self-knowledge, and knowledge of the other. Reconciliation is part of God's healing process, and in the context of interfaith dialogue the prospect of reconciliation may sometimes seem to be inconceivable. Yet, wherever there are wounds, wherever there is need to deepen self knowledge God will urge us forward to seek ways we can find things in common in the midst of the differences, and therein find healing.

In the story of the Canaanite woman Jesus appears to change his attitude in response to his conversation with her. In learning, in changing his attitude by his listening, he is setting the tone for our encounter with others different from us – those we are conditioned to think of as scary, or contemptible. Even if we believe we have the total fullness of truth in our faith, there must always be room to learn something new where we least expect it if we are following the way of Jesus.

Thus the New Testament encourages us and offers us examples from our Lord himself to enable us to be neighbour to those of different faith, to take an interest in each others lives and deep human needs, to have respect for each others convictions – aware that like the magi, human encounters can lead us to unexpected encounters with God, which will give new direction and new light to our journey of faith, and the places on earth where true faith can be found.