

A Journey with the Magi

A sermon on Matthew 2:1-12 by the Revd Margie Dahl, 6 January 2024

Imagine yourself in the court of King Herod the great, the King of the Jews. His family had converted to Judaism, but he was not a king in the line of David. He was not even a descendant of Abraham. But his family had ingratiated themselves into the good books of the occupying Romans and eventually he was appointed king. Herod faithfully collected taxes and so his regime was propped up by the Romans. But it was shaky.

Herod was caught between Rome which might depose him at any time and the Jewish people who viewed him with suspicion. His response was to lash out in violent outbursts that did not even spare members of his own family. Reading about him, I came across words like paranoid, erratic and deranged.

So, here we are in Herod's court. It's a considerable retinue of enablers and lackeys, whose future financial wellbeing is inextricably linked to that of Herod. This includes Jewish scholars who have forgotten psalm 72 which describes the ideal king. He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence, he redeems their life; precious is their blood in his sight.

Herod revels in his title as King of the Jews, a title to which he is not eligible either through blood or through practice. In the court, people tread on eggshells. Herod's fearsome temper and his extreme violence make him a person to be dealt with carefully.

One day, out of the blue, a bunch of strangers appear in the city looking for the child who was born king of the Jews. Herod is in a panic. His hold on the throne is tenuous at best and he has defended it with a ruthlessness that is hard to believe. He immediately gets hold of the religious scholars who reckon that the birth-place is Bethlehem. It's not just Herod, but all those who are dependent on him for their cushy lives are scared out of their wits. Then with the demeanour worthy of the most plausible and oily of con artists, he draws them into his murderous scheme. This is the setting for the story of Epiphany.

The three wise men, the three kings, the magi, whoever they were, have become the stuff of legend. They look pretty on Christmas cards or in nativity scenes. Little boys in bright costumes and cardboard crowns play the part in nativity plays, along with the first and second lobster. There are endless jokes, stories and poems about the fourth wise man who brought more practical gifts. The Russian tale of Babushka is the story of a woman who refused the magi hospitality and then followed them to make amends.

But the story is far from pretty. It is a story with dark overtones. Jesus is the king of the Jews. One person who recognised this was Pilate who hung a sign above Jesus on the cross proclaiming this in three languages, just to be sure that there was no ambiguity. Central to Jesus' proclamation was the kingdom of God which was a trenchant critique of worldly kingdoms. The writer foreshadows conflict between Jesus and the rulers of this world.

I could pick up any number of themes to share with you tonight. The story is replete with dog whistles for a community of Jewish Christians, people who knew the stories of God's relationship with the people and who knew their scriptures backwards. Jesus at the mercy of

a murderous king – Jesus is the new Moses and he will usher in a new covenant. Bethlehem was the city of David - Jesus is the new David, a king who will rule with justice and righteousness. Joseph was warned to flee in a dream – Jesus is the new Joseph, the dreamer, from the ancestral narratives who will lead the people in their time of need. The writer is telling us deep theology about how Jesus is the fulfilment of God's saving power. It's not a story about a cute baby. It is the overture to the gospel as a whole, giving us the themes that will be played out in the life of the adult Jesus. This story is true even if it never happened.

Or I could talk about the magi being the quintessential outsiders. They were foreigners, not part of the covenant. They studied the stars and astrology was strictly forbidden by Jewish law. So right at the beginning of this gospel is a story that challenged the Jewish worldview of who was in and who was out. This theme reaches its fulfilment in the great commission at the end of the gospel where the disciples are sent out to preach the good news to all nations. I can't over-emphasise how shocking, how radical, this was to a people who'd absorbed their separateness from other peoples with their mothers' milk.

Or I could talk about the rich symbolism of the gifts they offered. Gold was a gift for a king. You don't travel all that distance to bring a gift for any old king. They were a dime a dozen in the ancient world. This king was special. Myrrh was used for sacred anointing and anointing of dead bodies. It foretold Jesus' death. A strange gift for a baby unless the baby became a man whose death was of cosmic significance. And frankincense was an incense used in worship. At vespers we sing, "Oh Lord, let my prayer rise before you like incense." Our services in pre-covid days began with the incensing of God in the scripture, in the table and in the people. The gift of frankincense tells us that Jesus is God incarnate, God come to earth in human flesh to unite us with God.

But I'm not going to talk to you about any of those things. I'm going to take another direction. I'm going to explore the time-honoured theme of journey and see if there is anything we can learn for our spiritual journeys. The magi, whether there were two or three or seventeen, set off on a long journey. This was not just a holiday jaunt or attempt to curry favour with the family of a new king, this was akin to a pilgrimage, a quest undertaken for spiritual reasons.

The first step was preparation. These were people of science. Astronomy and astrology were not separate entities and while many ancient peoples were excellent astronomers, even without the aid of telescopes, they also believed that the heavens could give news of the birth of great leaders. The magi scanned the night sky often, charting the path of the planets and always on the lookout for some new revelation, for a special sign, for something unexpected.

And we can anticipate that such a long journey needed practical preparation. No nipping down to Flight Centre to organise an itinerary. Transport – camels? That's what art suggests and they were probably the most usual form of transport for such a long journey. Food and clothing would need to be sourced. Then they had to think of suitable gifts and clearly a lot of thought and money went into the purchases.

Our spiritual journeys need preparation. The call is different for each person and each of us has a different starting point. For myself, I have always been conscious of the lack of daily prayer in my life. I lacked the discipline to do that, even though I knew it was important. I

have been grateful for the challenge of daily prayer in this community which has drawn me more deeply into the mystery of God.

The magi asked questions. They didn't think that they had all the answers. Firstly, they discussed this star they'd seen. What is this new thing? What does it mean? How should we respond? Our spiritual journey is enhanced when we ask questions.

They were persistent. It was a long journey, much of it through terrain without many resources. There would have been times that they wondered if they were on a wild goose chase. Days that were exhausting. Times when they could hardly walk after all that time on camels. Good times when they were warmly received, difficult times when they were regarded with suspicion and rejected. But they didn't give up, their quest continued.

Spiritual dryness, persevering in our journey into God despite no apparent outcome, is a feeling common to the biblical writers and people of faith. Psalm 61 begins:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Teresa of Avila encourages us that in times of dryness we should be persistent. We might feel that we are just going through the motions of prayer and spiritual observance, but eventually our persistence will bear fruit in spiritual growth.

The magi were humble. There is no doubt that whoever they were, they were people of means. A journey like that would have cost a pretty penny. They felt free to go to the royal palace and enquire there. They were used to moving in exalted circles.

Matthew has no stable, no manger, no ox and lamb keeping time. We can imagine that the family home was modest, especially compared to Herod's palace. And yet they knelt down and worshipped. They were aware of something holy, something transcendent, something beautiful, in that house.

Humility is the basis of transcendence. It is what allows us to enter into something beyond ourselves. Where do we find transcendence? We can search for it in the natural world when we are left breathless by the beauty of our surroundings. Recently Jeff and I went on a twilight trip through the mangroves in a small boat in Brunei. While we saw fireflies, the proboscis monkeys were away on holiday and the crocodiles visiting family far away. But when the driver cut the engine and we sat there in the silence, it was awe-inspiring. We sat there in the dark listening to the silence. Although we were geographically close to the city, we were spiritually smack in the middle of God's extraordinary creation. I think most people have had that sort of experience.

But another moment of transcendence was when I anointed a dying man with his family gathered around. It was a thin place, heaven come to earth, as we acknowledged that this man was about to transition from this life to the next.

At times life can bombard us with pain and disappointment. Other people can let us down and sometimes we are downcast by our own behaviour and actions. Moments of transcendence is that they are cumulative. Their memory keeps us going in the tough times.

They reassure us that God loves us when we feel that the world is against us and that we are unhappy with ourselves. They are like moments of rest and restoration on our spiritual journeys. They keep us humble, knowing that we are not just bundles of urges and hormones spinning aimlessly around the universe. We are precious children of God, embraced in the loving arms of God our mother and father.

My final point here is about discernment. Having travelled such a long distance and finally encountering the Christ-child, the magi intended to go back to Jerusalem to report to Herod as they had promised. Discernment is the ability to judge. In Matthew's gospel, it is often related to dreams.

It is in a dream that God tells Joseph not to be afraid but to take Mary as his wife. It is in a dream that the magi decide to take an alternative route home and give Jerusalem a wide berth. It is in a dream that Joseph learns that he should take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt and later, that he should return.

In each of these cases, the dreamer changes their mind. Joseph marries Mary, the magi detour around Jerusalem, Joseph packs up and takes off for Egypt, Joseph returns to Nazareth. Discernment can lead us to making a big change in life. Or it can tell us that what we are doing is what we should be doing at this time.

Discernment is our task when we come to a crossroad in our life's journey. I came to a crossroad recently, quite suddenly, out of the blue. I have always felt inadequate, that I don't work hard enough. So in my ministry I've worked stupid hours and I've been resentful when people haven't followed me lead. I've always felt that I was no good at anything. The "heretic" Pelagius who believed that we have to earn our salvation was nothing on me. Then recently I was listening to a scholar read the story of the Annunciation and I heard my name in it. "Do not be afraid, Margie, for you have found favour with God."

This sense of call, of affirmation means a lot to me. The process of discerning where it may lead will be the work of the day-to-day, with the input, shaping and affirmation of my various communities.

As baptised Christians, we have all undertaken this journey. Yet in another sense, we undertake it anew each day, each year. With the grace of God, we all prepare carefully, travel persistently, seek advice, approach the sacred with humility, and discern the way forward. The Kingdom of God into which we are called is both journey and destination. Let us undertake the journey joyfully, guided by the star of faith.