

Vision: Wise Men from the East

Greetings to my brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is the third Sunday in the Advent Calendar. In normal times, by now the tinsel, candles and lights, cards and decorations around the houses and the towns are in full swing. Characters in the Christmas story are part of the Christmas decorations and celebration. Even the kitchens smell of Christmas: the fragrant candles and aromatic Christmas spices are wonderful. The smell of freshly peeled oranges is the smell of my childhood Christmas and it reminds me home.

This has always been my favourite season of the year and one of my all-time favourite activities has been the preparation for the Nativity play. For some reason, most of the time, the part I was given for the Nativity play was the role of 'Joseph' and Shepherds in the fields. I think I played them well! I definitely enjoyed being Joseph wearing a simple brown Shalwar Kameez, a plain gown, my head covered with a white cloth tied with a string. I also carried a staff and wore a fake moustache with a beard normally painted on my face. But I always fancied being one of the Magi because I would get to wear makeup, fancy brightly coloured kingly robes, a gleaming crown on my head and carry a beautifully ornate little box a present to baby Jesus while singing the famous song 'We three kings of Orient'.

I am sure many of you have memories of the characters you acted in the Nativity play. It is nice to have an element of fantasy in your life. By fantasy I mean the elements which seem to be out of this world like angels, star and Magi. I have not known in my living years anyone who dresses up like Magi and went on a quest like theirs: seeking for a king and not just a king but the King of Jews. I have not heard or seen a choir of angels, lighting up the sky just by being there. So these 'out of this world' experiences and events are fascinating to me.

Today my point of focus is 'Vision' and of course we are going to think about Magi, the Wise men from the East.

The passage we are going to read is from the Gospel of Matthew. Again, this passage takes me back 'down memory lane'. In the boarding house at school, we were given a passage from scripture and for the Christmas season, one of the passages was always on Magi. We would memorise it word by word in Urdu language and then narrate it to our boarding mistress who would reward us with cookies, biscuits and Christmas cards. Simple gifts as they appear but believe me these were the precious rewards. Anyway, you can pause and read; Matthew 2: 1-12.

Magi have fascinated me not just in my childhood but now as well. This year I decided to grace one of our sitting room walls with a beautiful piece of art depicting the Caravan of Magi riding Camels. The Magi are mysterious from the beginning. The Bible says that they came from the East, no name of their country or city, just

from the East. Then the Magi mentioned a gleaming star calling it 'His star'. I would imagine that they were called to King Herod's palace. If your imagination goes as wild as mine then, with your mind's eye, you would chase them around the palace, imagining the interior of king's palace and eavesdropping on their conversation with the king. Furthermore, when they arrived at their destination (led by the star) they opened their boxes and presented strange gifts. It all feels so fantastical. What is not there to be liked or believed? A kind of fairy tale in the midst of an important recorded historical event: the entry of our creator stepping into our world as a helpless baby.

It doesn't matter how fairy tale like this event appears; even as a curious child I never doubted the truthfulness of this event. To me it has always been fantastically true. The aspects of the event related to Magi which are not mentioned in the bible did not bother me. I believe that in the great scheme of things, all we needed to know about them was mentioned in the scripture. For example, what were their names? Where did they travel from? How did they travel? etc. Of course, you always remain curious. However, the point is that Matthew was not writing a history textbook for 21st Century. We are reading an ancient text which is approximately 2000 years old. Of course, people will interpret it differently. Imagination is a great gift that we humans have, and we have filled the narrated event of Magi with details borrowed from our surroundings and cultures. But for me, it does not change the focus of the story.

Recently I did some research and realised that my favourite characters, the three Magi, have been a cause of concern for modern Biblical scholars.

Many of them regard this event as a pious legend: to them the wise men are no more than a poetic fancy. If modern Biblical scholars doubt the arrival of Magi from the East then I wonder how they would have reacted towards 'The Witch of Endor' involving the summoning of Prophet Samuel from Shoel at the order of King Saul (1 Samuel 28), another fantastical event? At this point it feels appropriate to be reminded by Shakespeare, 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt in your philosophy.' The point I am trying to make is that although Biblical scholars scrutinise the text for its authenticity, many modern scholars don't believe in the supernatural and are not actually Christians. Religious narratives and experiences involve supernatural events, and religious text is full of them. So if someone approaches the text, not believing in the supernatural, this immediately introduces the element of bias from the outset of their quest.

There are so many books and interpretations of the prophecies related to the story of Magi. I bought one book called 'Mystery of the Magi' written by Dwight Longenecker. His book is like a detective work and he made a powerful case for the visit of the Magi to the little town of Bethlehem. He collected evidence from biblical studies, history, archaeology and astronomy. From his research, the evidence seems clear and compelling, that the mysterious Magi from the East existed and

were likely to be astrologers and counsellors from the court of the Nabatean King at Petra where the Hebrew messianic prophecies were well known. In the ancient world, Magi of Babylonian origins were known to be dispersed across Asia Minor, Syria, Arabia and Egypt. There are others who say that they were from modern day Iran. I will leave the Magi here with you along with all the mystery they carry and if you want to explore it further the books are waiting to be opened and read. Take a plunge to be fascinated.

To me, along with most Christians, these Magi are an important part of the Christmas story. The stories are not told just because they reveal the events but also because they hold wisdom. They tell us the truth and unpack the greater truth suggesting implications for our lives.

The Magi's appearance in the Nativity event begins with their arrival in Jerusalem indicting a journey they have taken coming from the East. They had a quest to complete and they were inquiring about it. Their quest caused disturbance not only in the city of Jerusalem but also in king's palace. They took advice from the king and went to Bethlehem as were told. They followed the star which led them to the house where baby Jesus was; offered the strange gifts they had brought; worshipped him and then they left for their country. We have no idea how long they stayed but we know that they did not go back to King Herod. They were warned in a dream and therefore followed another route back to their country.

Let me try to explain my thoughts on the implications derived from the story of Magi. Three points stand out for me: (1) seeking the king, (2) bringing him the gifts and (3) being told in a dream not to go back to the King Herod.

Jesus entered the world 2000 years ago. Many were there to see him in person, listen to him and then follow him. They became his disciples and remained faithful to him for the rest of their days. We have arrived in this world after 2000 years. Christ has already been born, lived, died and ascended to Heaven 2000 years ago. Now it is we who are on a quest to find him as our King and Saviour.

All mankind needs to seek him just like the Magi did. We as a human race got lost. I believe it all started with our fall in the Garden of Eden, where God put a flaming sword so that man would not eat the fruit from the tree of life and live forever in sin. It is all written in Holy Scripture – one needs to search. It says, 'Seek first the kingdom of God.' And also, 'Whoever believes in him shall have eternal life'. Wise men considered him King of the Jews and left to search for him. We all are on a journey. Some have found him earlier than others; some have been and will be deceived by the Herod of their time. Some worshipped him immediately as they found him; some took time to do so. Those who have found him and worship him as their King are set on a pilgrimage or journey. Jesus, the son of God, crossed the boundaries of time and space to dwell amongst humans as one of us. By entering our world, he paid the ransom and prepared the way for us to enter his world. He

told his disciples that he was going to prepare room for us in his father's house. So Magi remind us that mankind needs to seek him.

Secondly, the Magi brought very symbolic gifts. Today what do we have to offer Him? He is not physically amongst us but he is still here in a way. Church 'Christ's body' is here. He wants us to gather together and be witnesses for Him. We all know he does not need worldly gifts. He desires the harvest of our spirit which we have known from the Bible as the Fruit of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us consider the harvest of our spirit for a moment. This fruit has a way of manifesting its presence (or absence) in our lives which can affect the lives of many in the church and out of the church. Consider for a moment your life as a basket of harvest. Think for a moment which fruit of spirit you have in abundance, which one is a poor harvest, and which one is lacking in your basket of offering. Magi remind us that our gift to Him is to be Living Sacrifice: offering ourselves in His service.

Thirdly, the Magi had a dream about not going back to Herod. In my opinion dreams, visions, a little voice in your head are all different ways by which we are warned and instructed. One should consider oneself blessed if one has dreams and visions from God. Let's think how seriously we take our visions, dreams and the small voice we encounter. Many people would say dreams are products of our imaginations, but the Bible tells us that God has been revealing himself through dreams, visions and a small voice. Dreams and visions are not just for revealing big events, but they are concerned with our day-to-day life. Do you hear that little voice? What do you do about it? Does it satisfy you or do you become rebellious in response? What about dreams? Do you have them? I think they are an opportunity to pray for the events and people you see in your dreams and seek guidance.

Just like Magi, if you earnestly seek and have found Jesus then there is no turning back to Herod. The moment you met Jesus you began a pilgrim journey. The king of our time, who can distract us, is conforming to the world which Jesus himself said had hated him. Magi followed the star to find Jesus. We have his word to follow and the psalmist tells us that his word is like a lamp to our feet. As we live the days of our lives, God has a purpose and vision for our lives as individuals and as a church.

We will never know how the lives of Magi were impacted after finding and worshipping baby Jesus. Did he become the vision of their lives? It is highly unlikely that they lived to see Jesus, whom they came seeking as 'King of the Jews', dying on the cross marked as 'King of the Jews'. Jesus entered the world as a King and died marked as King too. Is he King in our lives? Is he part of our vision? Is our vision clear and focused? Are we still as keen on him as we were when we were young?

I remember as a young Christian, I had a strong desire to read and study the Bible and know it as well as I could. I remember, at the age of 14, I took part in a quiz on the book of Daniel. My Science teacher was one of the contestants too. Till today I'm very proud that I won the first prize and my Science teacher was the runner up.

If I compare my old self to my young 14 year old self, I must say that it is easier to be learning, trusting and believing when you are 14 than when you are 40 plus 😊. Life is hard, our priorities shift during our lives. We are impacted by so many people in our lives that sometimes it becomes hard to keep the vision glowing. It is not impossible. Apostle Paul talks about running a good race by staying focused and being a trim athlete. At the end of their journey, the Magi saw Jesus as just a helpless babe; but towards the end of our journey, we have faith to see Jesus as a King in his Glory.

Let's pray for the story of Magi which brings us a sense of the exotic and unfolds the implications for our lives.

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for giving this fantastic Christmas story to the world; the story of God stepping into the realms of lowly humans. Perhaps, we will never be able to fully understand the mystery of our Lord Jesus who became one of us, loved the world and died for us. We thank you for Christmas, a time to celebrate and celebrate with a focus. Thank you for all the lovely songs we have to sing, enjoy and marvel. Lord Jesus, you are the reason of our celebration. Help us to live with a focused vision in hope and faith. We remember our fellow Christians all over the world who celebrate Christmas because Jesus was born. Bless us today, our families, living far and wide in your big world. Keep them safe, happy and content. We also remember families who mourn the loss of their loved ones. Be near to them and make their pain less and bearable, shine your face on them in the dark times. I ask this in Jesus name. Amen

Jesus has been referred as the king of Jews at the beginning of his life but also at the end of His life when he was on the cross.