

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 2/1/22

A couple of days before Christmas we hosted the Dreamcatchers nativity play when the children acted out the Christmas story in front of their adoring parents. All the usual characters and suspects were there at the stable – Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the sleepy shepherd, three kings riding down the bumpy, bumpy road and of course whoops-a-daisy the angel.

It was a delightful presentation of a story we all know so well, or do we? I asked that question of myself when I sat down to think through what I was going to say today and I was surprised to discover that much of what I knew, or thought I knew, had more to do with nativity plays and creative writing than what Matthew actually says in his account.

Let me share a few of those thoughts with you.

Depending on which translation you use, Matthew calls the travellers wise men or magi. He certainly does not refer to them as kings; yet that is exactly what both the children and we sing about. All I can say for certain is that they held some status, otherwise they would not have been granted an audience with King Herod.

The fact that they explain to Herod the astronomical events which brought them to Jerusalem suggests that they were most probably astrologers who dedicated their lives studying the heavens for portents of significant events. The 1st century Roman writer Pliny the Elder records on a number of occasions Magi visiting various Kings and even the Emperor Nero...unfortunately though not about a visit to a new born king in Bethlehem.

Were there just the 3 of them? Well, yes and no. One early tradition states that there were 12 such visitors whilst another states that there were 3 because the number 3 has always been held as a special and significant number in the bible. What we do know is that Matthew names 3 gifts, so I think it we can safely deduce the number 3 was based on the number of gifts.

Having said that, I think the popular Christmas card image of 3 kings alone atop of their camels against the desert night sky is misleading because they would have been just 3 of a much larger caravan including bodyguards, servants and slaves to take care of their personal needs and supplies over a lengthy journey, as well as being a deterrent against bandits and the like.

And for many years, not only did I believe that there were 3 of them, but also, I knew their names: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. But the names, like many aspects of the story have their roots in tradition not the bible – indeed it was the venerable Bede in the 7th century who is attributed with naming them as such.

What about the gifts they brought?

Well, we know what the 3 gifts were because Matthew tells us. Many scholars think that these three gifts were chosen

for their special spiritual symbolism about Jesus himself—gold was universally considered to be valuable and beautiful, a gift fit for any king. Frankincense is seen a symbol of his priestly role, and myrrh a prefiguring of his death as myrrh was the embalming spice of choice at that time.

But is it as straight forward as that? You've all heard the saying – he has the gift of the gab – no names mentioned - but who are the gab? There is also potential danger surrounding gift giving – beware Greeks bearing gifts.

And there is potential political incorrectness about gift giving – the story is told that Boris asked his private secretary why there wasn't a nativity play in number 10 this year to be told that it had nothing to do with Covid, but the fact they couldn't find 3 wise men.

What was special about them?

We are told the wise men “bowed down and worshipped Jesus” as they presented him with their gifts. And this, I think is the crux of Matthew's account. Matthew's gospel is profoundly Jewish in outlook. The 1st century split the world into ‘them and us.’

‘Us’ being God's chosen people and the only ones who were in communion with God and ‘them’ being the rest of the world who God might tolerate but who were certainly not entitled in any way, to worship God. Yet, the very first people able to recognise who Jesus was and came to worship him were from ‘the rest’, otherwise known as the gentiles.

This means that the good news of Jesus Christ was shared with the whole world at the very beginning of his life, and that requires us to take a new look at the old adage - if you take Christ out of Christmas all you're left with is M & S.

Much better is to look at it the other way round – if you take M & S out of Christmas, all your left with is Christ.

Well, Christ and the sleepy shepherd, and the angel whoops a daisy of course!

Amen and Happy New Year