The story of the Magi - a short reflection.

Included in the Parish Quarterly December 2018

Most of us remember those times from our schooldays when, as Christmas approached, we prepared our Nativity Plays. The main parts were of course Jesus, Mary and Joseph but there were supporting players, shepherds, angels and the three kings (Magi). They usually entered to the strains of the well - known hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are”. Who are these somewhat mysterious figures and what part do they play in the Christmas story?

A good principle when reading Scripture is to ask not “is it true” but “what does it mean”. This is a good example of that way of thinking. The Magi only appear in Matthew`s Gospel. They are described not as kings but as “wise men” from the east who have followed a star to find the infant King of the Jews and to do him homage. Herod tried to use them to identify and eliminate one who he saw as a threat but they were warned in a dream to avoid Herod and after visiting the mother and child they returned from whence they came by a different way.

That`s the outline of the story but what is its meaning and why does Matthew relate it?

Matthew was at pains in his Gospel to link the birth of Jesus to Old Testament prophecy and story. He opens the Gospel by tracing the ancestry of Jesus back to Abraham via David thus establishing his kingship and leadership credentials and

quotes extensively from the Old Testament throughout the narrative. Jesus is the future Messiah for the people of Israel.

The wise men saw the star as it rose in the East and followed it until it “halted over the place where the child was”. Just as Balaam saw the star of David rise (Num.7) the Magi saw the star of the King of the Jews at its rising. The link with King David is strengthened. The light of the star “filled them with delight”. The Magi represent the gentiles and just as Jesus is to be the future King of the Jews so he is to be the “light to the Nations” foretold by prophecy.

When the Magi saw the child with his mother their first reaction was to fall to their knees and do him homage. They then opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are strongly symbolic: gold for kingship, frankincense for deity and myrrh for suffering and death. These are all aspects of the Gospel story as it unfolds.

The wise men then return from whence they came and pass into history. There is a tradition that their names were Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior. Where they came from we are not told and there is no real evidence that they even existed but the part they played in salvation history is immense and that is what counts.

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