

# NATIONS WILL COME TO YOUR LIGHT

ISAIAH 60:1

## Introduction

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. We like to tell how the wise men or magi came from the east following the star to Bethlehem during our *Christmas* celebrations, especially since they help make the nativity plays special. But you need to read between the lines of Matthew's gospel (who is the only one of the four to tell us about the magi). By the time the wise men arrive it would appear that Jesus is no longer a newly born infant. Two things in particular tell us that: one is that the wise men came to a house, not a stable. So perhaps enough time had elapsed for Mary and Joseph to manage to find lodgings in a proper house, not a cattle shed. The second is that Herod ordered all male children up to two years old to be massacred. So it would seem possible that Jesus was at least up to that age if Herod thought any rival to his throne might be up to 2. In the Christian calendar we separate the visit of the wise men from the actual birth of Christ by observing the feast of Epiphany. Also, it lengthens the Christmas season out, giving us markers along the way as we commemorate the different events that surrounded Christ's early life. (The cruelty of Herod's massacre is commemorated on 28<sup>th</sup> December as the Feast of the Holy Innocents.) After the feast of the Epiphany (usually on 6<sup>th</sup> January) we have a series of Sundays which make up the season of Epiphany when the set Bible readings say something about the nature of Jesus and who he is. Epiphany means "making manifest" – so we discover afresh more about Jesus, why he came and what we are to believe and understand about him.

## Who were the Magi?

All the Gospels seek to present Jesus to the world – each telling his story in their own distinct way and asking who he is. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry and during it the question of who he is comes up repeatedly. At his baptism we learn he is the beloved son of God. Jesus asks his disciples "who do people say I am?" at Caesarea Philippi. St Mark, at the scene of the crucifixion has the centurion as the first to give a full answer: "Surely this was the Son of God!" St Matthew wants to demonstrate how Jesus was not only for the Jewish people he came from but was meant for the world. So to emphasise this he tells about the visit of the strangers from far away. He calls them "magi" although we sometimes refer to them as the wise men or the kings. We often assume there were three and tradition has even given them the names Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But Matthew doesn't say there were three, he only mentions three kinds of gifts that they brought. These were both costly and meaningful gifts, affordable only to the wealthy. They were also the kinds of things that were traded between Arabia and countries to the north and east of Judaea, so were perhaps goods that were often carried in camel trains through the region. They were also goods that were typical of what Arabia had to offer: frankincense and myrrh are perfume products from the sap or resin of trees that grow in Arabia and north east Africa. Gold could also have been mined in a similar area. Matthew sees them as symbolic gifts: frankincense for prayer pointing to Jesus' divinity; myrrh used in burial customs, indicating that Jesus' death was to be meaningful. Gold points to his royal nature – not just the descendent of King David whom the wise men sought, but the Kings of Kings, the King of Heaven.

There are different suggestions as to who the magi were or where in the east they might have come from. What is important for Matthew is simply that they were not Jewish and that they were guided by a special star until they found who they were looking for. The word "magi" was the Greek name for members of a priestly caste in the religion of Zoroastrianism. This is an ancient religion, perhaps 3,500 years old. The magi were knowledgeable about the stars as well as learned in matters of religion. One of the most important things about this religion is

that it believes in one God and about the struggle between good and evil. These are things that Jews and Christians would easily agree with. Many other religions at the time believed in many gods and that we were victims of their conflicts or of fate. It is possible that the magi were also influenced by far Eastern religious ideas such as Buddhism or even Hinduism. Some of Jesus' teaching like the beatitudes is not unlike some Buddhist ideas about how to live. So we cannot put these other influences beyond the bounds of what influenced Jesus. People, as well as traded goods and ideas, were much more mobile in the ancient world than we sometimes think they might have been.

## Nations will come to your light

Isaiah the prophet proclaimed that a light would come to God's people. Nations will see it and respond, he declares. Followers of Jesus see that these words are fulfilled in Jesus the light of the world. If the magi from the east saw a special light in Jesus whom they sought long and hard in order to worship, is it possible that other religions also recognise something special or important about Jesus?

As it happens, some of the other major world faiths *do* respond to Jesus, and I would like to talk about some of these in a brief way. The reason why I think we should consider these things is not just because of Isaiah's prophecy, though that is a very good starting point. I think it is also important for Christian people to understand what other religions think about Jesus. We live in a very diverse society and we rub shoulders with people of other faiths – at work, in your street, amongst one's circle of friends or even amongst relatives. We must respect each other's faith and part of that is knowing a little of other's faiths. Other faiths have shown enough respect of Jesus to think and write about him. We should honour and know a little of that. We also need to quash the misunderstanding that we shouldn't impose Christmas celebrations on our multi-faith society. It is wrong-headed secularists that make that claim. Muslims and Hindus are only too happy to welcome the birth of Christ and to join in the celebrations.

## Judaism:

We should start with Jesus' own religious background. Judaism and Christianity have had a very troubled relationship. It is common for followers of Jesus to think that Jews ought to believe Jesus is their long-promised Messiah. But for many Jews he is not, and that is because he didn't fulfil many of the expectations of Messiah – especially in not literally re-establishing their religious ways in Israel. Also Christians have mistakenly persecuted Jews for long periods in the past, worst of all, believing that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death. That is a terrible belief which eventually led to the holocaust and we must never forget what an evil and mistaken event that was. For a Jew to become a Christian can feel like a betrayal of their people and Christians must respect and accept this. More recently some Jewish scholars have been sympathetic to Jesus and his teaching. They can see how his message was similar to the OT prophets, calling the people of Israel back to their true faith and seeking to live by God's laws.

## Islam:

The Moslem faith actually requires its adherents to revere Jesus. Before Mohammed, Jesus is the greatest of all the prophets and he is referred to in the Qur'an and the Hadith as "Isa". Although he is to be revered as a prophet, however, Islam does not believe he is divine. No being apart from Allah himself can be divine to a Muslim mind. But the Qur'an does describe Jesus' miraculous conception and Muslims can accept his miracles and the spiritual authority of his teaching. They also believe in his return one day. We do need to be clear, however, that Muslims cannot accept that Jesus died on the cross – to their mind Allah could never permit such

a defeat of his will. They believe Jesus was taken up to heaven and someone else replaced him on the cross. We therefore find much that Muslims will agree with us about Jesus but on one very crucial point, with respect we have to agree to disagree.

### Hinduism:

Jesus came centuries after the Hindu writings known as the Vedas – their ancient scriptures. But many Hindu scholars have written about Jesus since he was made more widely known on the Indian subcontinent through missionaries. Whilst Judaism and Islam may be classed along with Christianity as Abrahamic faiths, Hinduism along with other faiths of eastern origins, is a completely different sort of religion. In some ways Hindus easily accept Jesus – growing up in India I often saw images of many different gods on shop or home walls and this often also included a picture of Jesus. It seemed that it was a case of “the more gods the merrier”. There are critical views of Jesus in Hinduism – and these often arose during the days when India struggled to become independent of Britain. Some Hindus try to reinterpret Jesus, saying that Christians are mistaken about him. Others, especially M.K. Gandhi valued Jesus as a person and his teachings but reserved severe criticism of Christians who, in their view, had come a long way apart from the one they claim to follow. Some Hindu scholars try to universalize Jesus – to make him into a general religious principle rather than the unique Son of God.

### Conclusion

There is not time now to go into Buddhist ideas, but like the other faiths, they also vary in their responses to Jesus. We can't say that the magi from the east became Christians in the normal sense of the word. But they returned home by another way – not just to avoid Herod's evil schemes, but as changed men. They had found the whom they sought to worship and were never the same afterwards. But what do you think of Jesus? Who is he to you? What views do you take of him? Sometimes a lifelong Christian can forget what really stands out for them about Jesus. It's only when enriched or challenged by other views of Jesus that our own can grow clearer. So on this Feast of the Epiphany “come, let us adore him: Christ the Lord!”