

# SEARCHING AND FINDING

*ISAIAH 60:1-6 EPHESIANS 3:1-12 MATTHEW 2:1-12*

## Introduction

I don't know if you've come across the tradition of chalking the door. I've seen chalk marks on the doors of churches and Christian homes in Germany although it is something that may be found anywhere in the world. It's a tradition of invoking God's blessing on your home or church and is traditionally carried out at Epiphanytide. The letters chalked up on the lintel include the initials for the three wise men: C (for Caspar), M (for Melchior) and B (for Belshazzar).

On either side of these initials the first two and the last two digits of the year are marked. The initials of the wise men remind us of their visit to the house of the Christ child and are a way of invoking the blessing of God on our home or place of worship. The chalk dust reminds us of our mortal nature – that we are dust and will return to dust.

Of course, the Bible doesn't give us the names of the wise men, nor does Matthew even tell us there were three – he mentions three kinds of gifts. But the principle holds good, that as we celebrate the visit of the wise men to the child Jesus, we seek God's blessing at the beginning of a new year.

## Making Manifest

We are so used to blending the various stories of Jesus' birth that we forget how the individual gospels introduce Jesus to us. Mark and John don't tell any recognisable Christmas stories at all. Matthew tells us about Jesus being born in Bethlehem and then moves directly to the visit of the wise men.

It is from Luke that we get so much of the traditional stories we enjoy so much: the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary; the need for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem; the visit of the shepherds to the stable where the Holy Family were obliged to stay. Today we focus on Matthew's special Christmas story – the unexpected visit of men who were from a distant country in the east. Matthew uses the word "Magi" which means neither king nor magician.

There are some theories which suggest that they were from the priestly caste in Zoroastrian society, possibly Persian in origin. Part of their skill and tradition was to read the constellations and certainly Matthew tells us that it was a special star that they followed in order to search for a newly born royal child. We don't know why exactly these Magi took so much trouble to search for Jesus, but Matthew's reason for including this story is to point out how Jesus was not meant just for the Jews.

The Feast and the season of Epiphany which follows for the next few weeks, is a celebration of Jesus being made manifest, being revealed to the wider world. It is also a time to reflect on the nature of Jesus, who he is and what he means. The Bible readings and themes over the next few weeks ponder these matters, including his baptism and the miracle of changing the water into wine.

The season culminates at Candlemas when we commemorate Jesus' presentation in the Temple and what was said about him by Simeon and Anna.

## Two kinds of revelation

The Christian faith is one that is grounded in revelation. We believe what we do because we accept that God has chosen to reveal himself to us. We believe that without such revelation we would not know God for ourselves.

Theologians usually distinguish two kinds of revelation: general or natural revelation and special or supernatural revelation. In general revelation those who are so inclined, will see the hand of God at work in and through nature or human experience. Special revelation means the specific ways in which God has revealed himself: supremely through Christ, the living Word, and authoritatively through the written Word, the Bible. Natural revelation gives us a general feel for God, whereas special revelation guides us specifically to know who God is, what he is like and what his will for us is.

For instance, natural revelation may lead us to wonder at the beauty and mystery of God, but special revelation tell us that we are sinful and that Jesus came to save us from that sin. These two kinds of revelation can be seen in the quest of the wise men to find Jesus. Their knowledge and sensitivity convinced them that there was an important figure to seek out and recognise.

The symbol of this was the guiding star that led them ever westwards until they reached the place they presumed a royal birth may have happened: the palace of Herod at Jerusalem. The wise men showed that they were prepared to follow their wisdom wherever it might take them. They were open to the truth and to searching diligently, even if it took them far from their homeland and to an obscure country of a peculiar type of people.

## Re-directed by the Word

These days we are used to travelling with a high degree of information. In the days before satnavs we would readily turn to a map or atlas to help us find our way to an unfamiliar destination. Now we follow the electronic version of a road map and have the luxury and ease of a voice and a visual display to guide us step by step.

One of the helpful things about a satnav is that you can find an alternative route if your way is blocked – you can be redirected. I find it particularly helpful if I need to drive to an unknown address – the last few turns are made so much easier with a satnav guiding you. The wise men were able to get so far with the aid of natural revelation.

Their own wisdom took them a long way, the star brought them as far as Jerusalem and then they had to ask for directions. Herod was upset because his position was insecure. To have even a rumour of a rival and for complete strangers to be apparently more in the know than his own intelligence, must have been a nasty shock for him! So he summoned his own wise men, scribes familiar with the Hebrew scriptures and, to their credit, they look up the relevant guidance. The prophecy of Micah provides the specific direction to Bethlehem where an important birth will take place: a shepherd (who of course, reminds us of King David) for the people of Israel would come from the same place that David was from. Herod hides his complete shock behind his wicked scheming and tries to recruit the magi for his own purposes.

Now that God's word in scripture has provided specific guidance to the natural wisdom of the wise men, they are able to find him whom they sought. Their quest has found its goal, not where they might have expected, but they are sure they have found the right one, and they pay him homage and give him gifts. God's special revelation completes and fulfils the natural revelation the wise men followed.

## Gifts of meaning

I rather like the joke that you may have come across about three wise women. What would it have been like if there had been three wise WOMEN rather than men? They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts! As it was, they were men, and they brought things which were nothing like what you'd expect in a baby shower!

What do those gifts mean? Again, we need to bear in mind what Matthew might have meant by picking out this detail. Before we get more specific, though, all the gifts together signify homage. The wise men from a far country who were not even Jews, bring their offerings, bring their tribute. They recognise that in this child there is one whom they are prepared to respect, to pay him homage.

Matthew is showing how Jesus is not just a saviour to one particular people but for all people, even those least likely to recognise and accept him. Matthew is showing how the wisdom of the Hebrew scriptures points to Jesus and Matthew does this repeatedly throughout his gospel. God's special revelation in the written Word always points to Jesus, the living Word (or as John put it: the Word made flesh).

More specifically the gifts are significant of the nature of Jesus. Gold points to his royal nature – Son of David, Son of God, King of Kings. Frank (or pure) incense, signifies his priestly nature. Incense is used in worship to symbolise our prayers rising to heaven. Myrrh is an ointment, traditionally used in those days to embalm a dead body and

prepare it for burial. Myrrh foretold that Jesus, the priestly king would also fulfil his nature by dying. Matthew, at the beginning of his story of Jesus sets up themes that will grow and develop as he tells the story to the end.

## Conclusion

As we near the end of Matthew's story about the magi notice how he ends it himself. The magi are warned to avoid Herod's scheming ways in a dream and return home by another route. In this they show their obedience to the heavenly king Jesus rather than the earthly Herod, even though they perhaps owed him their gratitude for his hospitality. Natural revelation is still there for them: they are warned in a dream. In other words, just because the guidance of the Bible is there, doesn't mean to say that nature and human wisdom no longer operates. Both go together. God intends us to be sensitive to both kinds of guiding star: what we can perceive for ourselves AND what his word has to say to us. This is because the Holy Spirit is behind both. When we follow both, we, like the magi, will continue our journey by another way: we are changed by the encounter with Jesus. May that be so for us!