

The Star

Matthew 2. 1 – 6 – Follow the star?

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.’ (Mt 2. 1b-2)



I guess that most of us know the Nativity Story – we will have seen it portrayed in schools and churches, on screen etc. many times over and are so familiar with it that we often fail to read what the Bible actually says. Of course, the story includes the three wise men, who followed the star all the way from ‘the east’ to Bethlehem, to join in with the shepherds in the stable, worshipping the infant Jesus. Except, it’s not quite what the Bible says...

Matthew is the only one of the four gospels in our Bibles to mention the Magi. Matthew reports that they came "from the east" to worship the "king of the Jews". The gospel never mentions the number of Magi, but most western Christian denominations have traditionally assumed them to have been three in number, based on the statement that they brought three gifts but, in Eastern Christianity, especially the Syriac churches, the Magi often number twelve. Their identification as kings in later Christian writings is probably linked to Isaiah 60:1–6, which refers to "kings [coming] to the brightness of your dawn" bearing "gold and frankincense". Further identification of the magi with kings may be due to Psalm 72:11, "May all kings fall down before him".

The Bible says nothing about the Magi coming to the stable, nor does it suggest that this is at the same time as the Shepherds (nor does it even talk about a stable!!!). Matthew simply presents an event at an unspecified point after Christ's birth in which an unnumbered party of unnamed "wise men" (*μάγοι*, *mágoi*, in the original Greek) visit him in a house (*οἰκίαν*, *oikian*, in the Greek), not a stable, with only "his mother" mentioned as present.

And what of the star that they followed? Well, the Bible only says that the magi came to Herod, in Jerusalem and he sent them on to Bethlehem, and they noticed that the star they had seen at its rising went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. So, it seems, they didn’t follow the star all the way from ‘the East’ to Bethlehem, but they observed it going before them on the last bit of the journey – the star went before them.

One of the things that is often said about the Christian faith is that it’s a journey – and certainly that’s my experience, it’s a journey with God. In my early years as a minister I thought that my task was to take Jesus into the various places that I went, in churches, homes, workplaces etc. My task was to take Jesus. But it didn’t take me too long to realise that, actually, Jesus got there long before I did and my task as a minister, was to help people to discover the Jesus who went before us.

In order to get to Bethlehem the Magi needed to be capable of reading the signs of the times, of hearing what God was saying to them and acting on it. On that last bit of the journey, the star went ahead of them, but for the rest they used their intelligence and training to see where God was leading. Maybe we need to do the same today; to read the signs of the times, using our intelligence and wisdom to help us to understand what the signs are saying to us. Then we need to go where we are called to go, and to discover the God who is already there and waiting for us to point him out to others.

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