**The visit of the Magi**

Now you will be aware, if you were here last week, that I spoke at length about how we should be interpreting the Nativity stories and the relevance of the Magi. So, you may well be sitting there thinking, I do hope we are going to hear something different this week!

Well, yes you will. However, I am going to speak again about the Magi because, for one thing, we only have one chance in three years to ‘go to town’, as it were, on the Magi as only Matthew, of all the gospels includes their visit. Also, because it is an account that is absolutely crammed with revelation.

However, just because only Matthew includes the visit does not mean that only he thinks that the Epiphany message matters to Christians.

In spite of God’s instructions through his prophet Isaiah, which we have heard this morning, there had been no inclusion of the gentiles before this time, probably because, from either side, there was no comprehension of what was intended.

Inclusivity is never an easy principle to uphold, even if we think we understand what it means. The fact that the prophecy with its principle of inclusivity has been preserved in scripture to which we recurrently return should tell us something.

The arrival of the ‘Magi’ – which can mean magicians, astrologers or experts in interpreting dreams, portents or other strange happenings, introduces us to something which Matthew wanted us to be clear about from the start. If Jesus is in some sense king of the Jews, that doesn’t mean that his rule is limited to the Jewish people. At the heart of many prophecies about the coming king, the Messiah, there were predictions that his rule would bring justice and peace to the whole world see psalm, 72 and Isaiah 11. Matthew will end his gospel with Jesus commissioning his followers to go out and make disciples from every nation. That , it seems is the way that the prophecies of the Messiah’s worldwide rule are going to come true. There are hints of the same thing at various points in the gospel even though Jesus did not deliberately seek out gentiles during his ministry. But here, even when Jesus is an apparently unknown baby, there is a sign of what is to come. The gifts which the Magi bring would have been considered appropriate in the ancient world for kings or even gods.

There is another way in which this story points ahead to the climax of the gospel. Jesus will finally come face to face with the representative of the world’s greatest king – Pilate, Caesar’s subordinate. Pilate will have rather different gifts to give him, though he too is warned in a dream not to do anything to him. His soldiers are the first Gentiles since the Magi to call him King of the Jews but the crown they give him is made of thorns not gold and his throne a cross. At that moment, instead of a bright star there will be an unearthly darkness, out of which we shall hear a single Gentile voice: yes, he really was God’s son.

So what should we understand by the Epiphany, our take away from this account.

Listen to the whole story Matthew is telling. Think about what it meant for Jesus to be the true king of the Jews.

Firstly, the epiphany is an act of witness: something that we have to see. We may not be able to rival the long journey from beyond the known world in search of the King of the Jews. But we may well journey in prayer, worship and pilgrimage which may itself be long. We may also undertake a spiritual journey, probably a long spiritual journey to a moment of Epiphany, a state of comprehension.

Secondly, the epiphany does and will change us from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge. We should not depart to our own country without having learned something, realised something or been re-energised for what lies ahead.

Certainly, the vision we encounter when we behold our infant King and comprehend him and what he is, is a treasure that we receive and the knowledge we depart with is more precious than anything we may bring with us.

And the relevance of the vision of the Epiphany is that it is a treasure to be shared.

The light is one that begets light. Taken together all the Epiphany readings are shot through with light – dawn light; star light and, most importantly, divine light.

What we don’t know and are not told is how the visit of the Magi changed them. What were they expecting when they set out, why did they set out, the fact they first visited King Herod because that was where they expected a king to be born and located, suggest that what they were witnessing was the stuff of kings.

And yet, when they came face to face with the Christ child in his humble home, they recognised the Christ “and were overwhelmed with joy”. Any preconceptions were blown away by the moment. As they rose from their knees, we are told that they departed joyfully out of our account through which we have witnessed, yet again, to the strange way in which God plans to free the universe and bring it back to union with Him. amen