

Reflection for Epiphany 2021

I was highly delighted to get a clear view of the much-vaunted conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, said to be the brightest occurrence of this (not altogether uncommon) event since 1226. As you may know, it has been suggested that an earlier conjunction in 7BCE might just have been the star of Bethlehem described by Matthew.

Delighted as I was to see it (it even appeared for a while to come to rest above Blanchland, which might just indicate something special) it was hardly a blinding light and certainly not nearly as impressive as the Hale-Bopp Comet back in 1997, which seen from the dark skies of the deep countryside of Fonsoumagne, our French home, was truly awe-inspiring. But then, the Bible doesn't say the Bethlehem star was bright, just that it was special in the way that its appearance announced the arrival of a new king.

Astrologers of the ancient world were careful to spot such portentous signs and to help reveal their meaning, which gets us straight into the heart of the remarkable story told by Matthew. Jupiter, by the way, was the royal planet, Saturn pointed to 'westlands' to which the magi travelled and the constellation in which it was set, Pisces, symbolised the last days.

The coming of the Magi from the East to worship the baby Jesus is rich and multi-layered. It's meant to jog our memories if we know our Old Testament, and would have rung many other bells for Matthew's contemporaries who didn't. It's packed full of symbolism, but is sufficiently arresting even if you don't know all that background to be memorable and thought-provoking.

It possibly doesn't help, of course, that over the years other elements have been accreted onto it. The foreign visitors, for example, were Magi, says Matthew, astrologers and sages, but sometimes derided as quacks, folk who lent their name to magic. The idea that they were kings came much later, when folk reflected on Psalm 72, which talks about kings of Tarshish rendering tribute and of Sheba and Seba bringing gifts and falling down in worship to a king. The king to whom they came is Solomon, the son of David who reigned almost a thousand years before Jesus.

Matthew invites us to think of Solomon and other the possible parallels with Jesus. Even Solomon's name was symbolic, it means, 'the peaceful'. And Jesus comes as Prince of Peace, although that title too has much earlier origins in the prophesy of Isaiah, which also weaves a powerful thread through our story. But back to Solomon for a moment. Does Matthew want us to remember how Solomon was visited by the Queen of Sheba, who brought gifts to him of gold spices?

Isaiah talks about nations coming to the light of Israel and kings to the brightness of its dawn, bringing with them gold and frankincense. It's easy to see how Matthew wants to apply this to Jesus. Matthew is intent on telling us that Jesus is also a king or ruler, but unlike Solomon, a divine ruler. This may well have also impressed those who didn't know their Hebrew Bible, because in the Graeco-Roman world there are plenty of other stories of stars and comets signifying a new rule (when a comet was seen during Nero's rule it caused a chaos of speculation) and mysterious foreigners foretold the births of other great rulers including, it was said, Alexander the Great and Augustus.

I've just made superficial scratch on the surface of the rich allusions and connections this story evokes, but it certainly isn't intended to be a giant kind of holy Christmas quiz. You don't even have to decipher what the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh signify in the way that one of the more popular carols suggests. And it's fine to have an open mind about how many magi there actually were – Matthew doesn't say there were three of them. What really matters is that you first of all get the main points that Matthew is driving home, which are all to do with who Jesus is.

Yes, Matthew is consistently keen to assert that Jesus is the fulfilment of Hebrew prophesy (he quotes the prophet Micah directly too here, of course), but he really wants us to know that the king Jesus, who comes not just to the Jews but to the Gentiles too, who deeply threatens the established centres and patterns of earthly power, is also in some extraordinary way linked to God. In Jesus, he wants us to see that the nations submit to the one true God. Yes, there are parallels with Solomon and others, but as Jesus himself will later say, 'something greater than Solomon is here!'

But there's more. The story is told against a backdrop of human abuse of power and violence. Herod was all too horribly real. Yes, Pharaoh may once have also slaughtered innocent children to wipe out the potential threat to his rule of Moses, but Herod was unstable and malicious as other, non-biblical sources make clear. The point is that Jesus is born into a chaotic, unpredictable world. The same point was made later by Leonardo da Vinci when he made sketches for a painting of the visit of the Magi to Jesus. The background shows decaying buildings and men preparing for war.

Jesus still comes to a world that has more than its fair share of chaos and uncertainty. You don't need me to spell that out; but the point is that he still comes into this all too real world to bring real hope, by subverting our destructive, selfish and oppressive values that prevent us from being the people God yearns for us to be. God wants us to live life to the full and live it abundantly. Even in our broken world Jesus will make this possible, even through us, if we have the faith and courage to follow his way.