

The Parish of Wellow

Searching Issues

What about other religions?

Passage and Sermon Notes

Please feel free to take these sermon notes home with you.

1. Sermon Passages

Isaiah 60: 1-6

1 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.

5 Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.

6 Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

2. Sermon Notes

Who were the wise men from the East?

Matthew's text does not speak of kings (perhaps a later reference back to Isaiah 60.3) nor does it give their number (which probably derives from the three gifts). Later tradition gave them the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar)

The gifts traditionally referred to the acknowledgement by the wise men of Jesus' kingship (gold), his divinity (frankincense), and his humanity which was to experience death (myrrh).

But what is often overlooked is the fact that the wise men were not Jews, and no suggestion is made by tradition that they became Christians.

The Greek text calls them magoi, hence magi. Some translations translate this as astrologers, because of their following of the star. But all the cultures of the ancient East drew conclusions from the heavens which we would call astrology.

Through the Old Testament most references to other religious traditions are in terms of hostility and the futility of their worship. But there is also another theme in which God has to work through, for example, the kings of Egypt, Assyria, and others, because of the faults of the Hebrew people, who had become blind and deaf to his word.

One of the key teachings of Jesus' ministry is that God works not only through the strictures and beliefs of the established Jewish religion but also through other communities of faith - the Samaritans, the Phoenicians, the Romans, and others - as well as in and through the lives of the marginalised and dispossessed.

Christian history also is marred by conflict between Christians and those of other faiths, as well as conflict between Christians themselves. But again there is a less well known history of encounters engendered by a spirit of love and respect for the sincerity of others.

This emerged in the latter part of the 20th century in a more explicit form, perhaps because of the realisation that the horrors of the Holocaust.

The Vatican Council in 1965, and later gatherings of the major Christian denominations, including Lambeth Conferences of the Anglican Communion, affirmed that it is not incompatible with Christian belief to acknowledge that God works in and through other religions.

This does not mean that we deny our Christian faith or are weak in witness.

it does not mean that we should be afraid of showing Christian symbols at this season. My Muslim and Jewish friends are astonished at the suggestion, which does not come from their communities.

It does mean that we do not regard other faiths as the work of the devil, nor keep ourselves deliberately in ignorance of their teachings.

It does mean that we do not compare the best of Christian practice with the worst of the practice of others.

It does mean that we sometimes have to acknowledge that Christians have sometimes behaved badly.

It does mean that we can learn from others.

The Wise Men came mysteriously out of the East, and departed mysteriously to avoid evil.

Can we find it in our hearts to greet with openness and confidence gifts that may be being brought to us from the East in our own times?

The mystery of God made man which we celebrate at this time always has more to offer us as we travel on our journey of faith with the gift of Jesus' presence in our midst and come to know him more deeply as the years roll on.

If you would like to discuss these notes further please feel free to call me on 01761 470249

Kevin Tingay 8th January 2006