

Epiphany

The story of the visit to the infant Jesus by foreign dignitaries has great spiritual significance. It is rooted in fact, although some of the finer details - as traditionally told - may not be historical.

The significance of the story is that it tells us that Christ came for the benefit of the whole human family - his teaching, the example of his life, and the power of his Spirit is to enable everyone to become fully human, fully alive - in this world and beyond it.

The facts are: that important visitors travelled from a distance to pay respect to the child whose birth had been suggested to them by the appearance of a new star in the night sky above them.

The words found within the book of the Prophet Isaiah give an indication of the origins of these visitors. They come from 'Midian, Ephah and Sheba' - these are names of territories or tribes from Arabia.

In the time of Christ the people occupying these lands were Nabateans. They had once been nomadic tribesmen but over the centuries had eventually emerged as a nation state, first in submission to Greece and then to Rome. During the rise of the Roman Empire the Nabateans had close links with their neighbours, the Jewish people, then ruled by Herod the Great. Herod's mother was in fact a Nabatean princess.

The Nabateans were skilled traders whose capital was the city of Petra in Jordan. They had control over the water supply in the Arabian desert and over the valuable trade routes. Ships crossed the Indian Ocean landing at Yemen where the Nabateans loaded their camel caravans to make the trek to the port of Gaza, and from there shipments took their goods to the rest of the Roman Empire. They also controlled the shipping in the Red Sea, and the trade routes from Egypt north to Syria, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and Persia.

Arabia was famed in ancient times for its gold mines. It was also the one place where the shrubs grew from which they collected the sap to make incense and myrrh.

At the time of the birth of Christ the Nabatean King, Aretas IV, had strong political and economic motivations to send a diplomatic entourage to Herod's court to pay homage on the occasion of the rumoured birth of a newborn future King of the Jews. These were the 'wise men' of the Gospel story.

It seems that the Nabateans were enthusiastic stargazers. Archeologists have discovered a stone-carved zodiac in the ruins of a Nabatean temple, and such places of worship were traditionally built in alignment to the constellations and planetary movements.

People who studied the heavens so closely, as astronomers or as astrologers, would certainly have noticed the appearance of a new star in the firmament - or (perhaps we would say) of the arrival of its light after that had crossed the vastness of space from the actual far-distant location of the star from which it came.

They put their own interpretation on the appearance of that light and a diplomatic mission set off to visit Herod, their powerful neighbour, bearing gifts - gold, incense and myrrh - with their natural origins precisely in that geographical location, representative of their culture and of their good will.

This is the historical basis of the evangelist Matthew's narrative.

There are other facets to the story - very familiar to us from our Christmas carols - which have accrued down the centuries, arising out of Christian devotion and theological reflection. These express our very proper belief that the Gospel is for all to hear; and that Jesus is the 'saviour of all the nations of the earth', in every place and in every age, and at every time of our life.

But these suggestions - such as, that the special Visitors or Magi were three in number; that they were kings; that one was young, another middle aged, and the third of venerable age; or that they were of three racial or ethnic groups - are notions that have arisen from Christian piety, as have their suggested names of Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar. The interpretation of the meaning of their gifts as symbolic of Jesus identity is also a later theological reflection, though an apposite one.

All these details are not found in Matthew's narrative but they do give due emphasis to the universal pertinence of the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The passage from the book of Isaiah which is cited in our Mass today encourages us to 'see and be radiant; for our hearts to thrill and rejoice' because (as the song of angels put it) 'a saviour has been born to us who is Christ the Lord'.

As a New Year begins our anxious hearts should take courage from the promise of the Lord Jesus to be with us 'all days even to the end of time'. And we should recommit ourselves to live our lives according to his teaching - *simply, sustainably, and in solidarity* (we might say) - in a respectful relationship with all of God's creatures in this world, over which we have been entrusted with responsible stewardship.

As individuals and as a Christian community we should ourselves be 'a shining light' showing the way to the happy future of humankind.

[With acknowledgements to Dwight Longenecker, 'Mystery of the Magi - the Quest to Identify the Three Wise Men', cited in The Tablet, and The Catholic Herald, 30.12.17].

