

Epiphany – Today's Magic

Sometimes the special visitors to Bethlehem in the Gospel are described as 'wise men', and many scholars suggest that they may have been 'star-gazers' – Persian astronomers or maybe astrologers: studying the stars above in ancient scientific endeavour, or perhaps to seek meaning and purpose in events as they unfolded on earth.

These 'wise men' observed what was to them a new star, one long-born far away in the cosmos, the light from which had finally crossed the great distance to them on this earth.

Or perhaps what they saw was a comet, in view for a while before disappearing once again into the vastness of space.

Whatever it was, it was of significance to them - maybe scientifically, or because for them it was of religious, even political, importance – as, indeed, it seemed to be to King Herod.

The Greek word used by Matthew in his Gospel to identify them is *magi* from which we derive the word *magic*.

There are a number of features about the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels which to modern minds may come across as 'magical' and so be dismissed as the fantasies of simple people. Obvious examples are the appearance of angels to various people, and the guidance of a star to a child born of a virgin.

Nonetheless, the evangelists put before us the experiences of first hand witnesses, in biblical imagery, and in a context of faith. The perennial pertinence of these matters, their continuing appeal to human hearts in every generation, means that they cannot be lightly dismissed: they have significance for us today as much as ever before. Hence the stories are told over and again.

Actually the Bible itself is consistently hostile to magic. In the Old Testament and in the New there are stories which relate a continual effort to rid the world of magic and superstition in favour of the reality of a living, loving God, experienced by trustworthy witnesses in their personal and communal history.

The Bible is critical of magic on the grounds that magic offers a short cut out of the limitations that are part and parcel of our humanity. Magic suggests that there is a way, with the flick of a wand, or the chanting of a formula of words, of changing something we are experiencing for the better, or at least to our advantage.

Magic is a delusion of those who cannot cope with the fact that we are limited creatures, that we will grow old and die, and that we can never have everything. We will always be dependent - on food, oxygen, and not least on the love of others to support and sustain us. Because of this, we will often feel pain and loss.

Magic is the belief that there is an easy way of dealing with all of this. But it cannot be bypassed - face it we must

We need to recognise that 'magical' solutions to our problems and anxieties are still being offered to us and that they still do not deliver on our expectations.

We live in an age that prides itself on its rationality – yet there are many among us who think that the wave of a credit card will be as effective as any wand in sorting out a problem.

We may think that if we became a celebrity – even for a few fleeting moments – that our empty hearts will find satisfaction.

Or we might play the national lottery in the fond belief – against much evidence to the contrary - that a significant win will solve all our troubles.

And every night on our TV screen, advertising seeks to persuade us that if only we purchase this, that, or the other product our lives will be transformed, enriched, and we will be from care, or at least have much less to worry about.

All of this is an attempt to escape from something that cannot be escaped from – the ordinary conditions of life and the underlying anxieties that lie deep in our hearts: do I have any real personal value; does my life have any meaning; is what I am now experiencing is all that can be expected?

The Christian tradition insists over and again that we cannot defy the basic gravity of our humanity.

The Christian religion also enables us to rid ourselves of the persistent belief that we are the centre of the universe, or that we have the answers to every question.

The Christian faith offers us a profound sense of our personal worth, a purpose to our life - however humble and limited that life may be.

Christian doctrine is that our hearts will become satisfied - but only through the practice of generous self-giving.

Christian doctrine offers humanity the largest hope as to our own ultimate future – as individuals and as a community: *viz.* resurrection to a new life radically different from and far beyond what we now know. This life we declare is already being lived by Jesus as the many witnesses of the New Testament testify.

Wise men, wise women, wise people young and old, are invited once again by today's Feast to come to the One who promises to answer our perennial longings. Magic, ancient or modern, offers us no substitute.