

Sunday 6 January 2019, Cashmere Presbyterian Church

The Feast of the Epiphany ... and the good Book Preacher: Silvia Purdie

Bible Readings

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Matthew 2: 1-12

Ah, it's summer time at last. Summer has arrived in NZ with a vengeance, what a glorious week we have had.

For many of us, summer holidays mean time to relax, which means time to sit back with a good book. Is that something you are enjoy? What do you reach for to read? Tell the person next to you, what do you read? Do you read to relax, or to learn? What have you got on the go at the moment?

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Me, I confess that I am not that much of a reader. I always have a couple of books by the bed, and my mum sends me cuttings from the Listener, and I keep up with the news of the day online. Currently I am reading about faith and ecology, as I'm working on a Lenten study series for you about what the Bible has to say about our environment. But that's more work than rest. I confess that I often prefer to write than to read – it's a kind of narcissism I suppose.

I'm intrigued in our reading from Ephesians today that Paul writes about his own writing. He is talking about his passionate conviction that something radically new is breaking through from God – and he is making the audacious claim that he has new revelation from God to share, new truth which will challenge people's assumptions and disturb their whole way of looking at the world ... and then he adds in this comment, which in our pew bibles is written in brackets.

.³ God revealed his secret plan and made it known to me. (I have written briefly about this,⁴ and if you will read what I have written, you can learn about my understanding of the secret of Christ.)

But that is the power of writing, isn't it – that by reading marks on a page we can learn about the understandings of the person who made those marks in the first place, even when those marks have been copied and copied and translated and copied and translated and copied countless times between the first mark and me reading this right now off this piece of paper.

We are blessed with practically infinite access to written texts, through our wonderful libraries and the whole Kindle thing which I'm trying to learn how to use, and then of course there is the anything anywhere vastness of the internet.

I hope you do find some good stuff to read, both for the pleasure of it and for the learning of it.

I wonder what you will be interested to learn about this year.

Tell the person next to you : what is something that you would like to read more about?

Back 2000 years ago written texts were much more rare and valuable, and the study of ancient texts was a much more difficult thing. Today on this feast of Epiphany our focus is, of course, on the 3 kings, the 3 wise men. Though of course the Bible does not say there were 3, or that they were kings. Matthew's story names them as Magi, who were most probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia, scholars of ancient texts and the stars.

I wonder what you think about this story of the wise men. It's a bit of a puzzle really. Is it historically accurate? Did it really happen? It's such a bizarre story, it seems too outrageous to be true, or maybe it is too outrageous not to be true.

There is definitely some historical basis for the story.

The Zoroastrian faith in ancient Persia did have academics, scholars and priests known as Magi. They did study the stars. There was a prophecy in their faith about a star appearing as a sign for the birth of an important king. And Magi did travel in search of this king to honour his birth.

A well known such visit happened in the year 66, not long before Matthew wrote his gospel, when the king of Armenia made a journal of tribute to Rome, together with several Magi. A group of Magi could well have traveled to Israel seeking the fulfillment of their faith prophecy.

And there is definitely some historical basis to the story about King Herod's vicious and violent reaction to the suggestion that a new king had been born in Bethlehem. This specific atrocity is not mentioned elsewhere in Jewish history, but it is certainly in keeping with what we know of the man.

But ... there are problems with this story. There is no clear and obvious agreement among today's astronomers about the star that moved and then stopped. It might have been a comet, or an alignment of planets, but nothing quite fits Matthews dating.

And why was it not recorded by Luke? If Luke had talked directly to Mary, as I think he did, surely such a visit from Persian Magi would have been vividly remembered and recorded elsewhere.

But the biggest problem with the story, in my mind, is the whole business of the star stopping over Bethlehem and leading the Magi to the exact house where baby Jesus was. That part of the story is just deeply implausible. And I don't at all mean that we modern people know that that can't happen – actually in our day and age it could happen. We have seen police helicopters shining bright beams of light down from the sky onto a house roof and into the window. Not so 2,000 years ago. This detail of the story was as implausible then as it is now. So what was Matthew thinking, writing that the star stopped over the exact house where Jesus was living?

It strikes me as odd because all through his gospel Matthew makes careful use of his sources. Sure, Matthew might have just made up the whole dramatic story of the Magi, but that's not how Matthew worked. Matthew chose some stories about Jesus and left out others, and Matthew had some important points that he wanted to make about who Jesus was and he re-worked his material to bring these themes out. But I do not think that Matthew just made stuff up.

My opinion is that Matthew was told this story by someone else, and that Matthew genuinely believed that the story was historically accurate, even though he was a bit vague on some of the details ... so, I think Matthew himself really did not know how the Magi found the baby Jesus and he just kind of fudged it with the star stopping overhead thing. Call it story tellers' creative licence.

But I don't really know. What do you think? Does it matter?

What does matter as we read the Bible, especially the gospels, is that we grapple with the question – why did this story matter to the gospel writer? What was so important to Matthew about the Magi story that he decided to include it, even though he knew perfectly well that it didn't quite make logical sense?

The answer takes us back to our old books. Matthew was determined to make the connections for his readers between the person of Jesus and the old books of the Jewish faith. So the Magi are, for Matthew, a fulfillment of prophecies of the Psalms, Isaiah, Micah. We read Isaiah's prophecy this morning:

**Nations will come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
the riches of the nations will come,
from Sheba will come gold and incense.**

and from Psalm 72:

**¹¹ May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.**

The Magi coming from far away, outside of Israel, using scholarship and astrology far outside the Jewish faith, is important to Matthew in setting the scene for Jesus. For in Jesus God takes the truth and the heart of the Jewish faith and expands it outward, east, west, north and south, into the whole world, for all people.

And this is the same mind-bending revelation that Paul spent his life preaching and writing about. Here is the divine mystery that the Magi were seeking and that the Holy Spirit showed Paul. Here is the good news of great joy that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds. Here is the fulfillment of the longings of the prophets of old, but now shown openly to the church, declares Paul:

The secret is that by means of the gospel the Gentiles have a part with the Jews in God's blessings; they are members of the same body and share in the promise that God made through Christ Jesus.

The gentles, the nations, the peoples of all the earth – we have been received into the family of God. We can inherit the riches of God. We can be blessed with all the blessings of God. Not through our own goodness or effort. Not through any right of our own. But through Jesus. Only through Jesus.

I have talked this morning about the importance of books. We are people of the book, and this year I will keep on encouraging you to read the Book of Books, our holy scriptures, and keep on learning more of God's revealing. I encourage you to go out and buy yourself a new Bible, for a fresh translation brings out new insights. Pray, as Paul did, that the Holy Spirit will inspire you as you read.

I have talked this morning about the importance of the act of reading within our bible stories, and I have talked about issues of historical accuracy in the writing of our gospels. I have claimed that Matthew might have been a bit unclear about some details of the Magi story but that he himself believed that the story was true.

Christian mission throughout the ages and throughout the world has always promoted literacy. Reading is important. So enjoy your books this summer, and choose good books through the year, for this is an important way for God to speak into your life.