

Epiphany 2023 1st Jan.

Did you know that we sing a load of rubbish about the Three Kings? We do - honestly!

And it doesn't take the brains of an archbishop to work it out either, or I wouldn't have realized it was nonsense.

Think about it; we say that they came from the East - that part is quite likely, as to have come from the West to Jerusalem would have entailed quite a swim across the Mediterranean.

Then we say that they 'followed a star' - well, that bit is not in the bible. The account in Matthew - and it is ONLY in Matthew - says that they 'saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him'. If they had seen his

star in the East and followed it, they would have ended up in India.

Even in their day, stars didn't move around. Most stars were just that - stars. They didn't have telescopes, so the brightest stars would have been planets. Moving stars were comets, which didn't last long and were very hard to spot. They apparently called them 'hairy stars' because of the trail of light behind them.

So they weren't following a star - or they would have ended up in India, and they didn't follow it to Bethlehem; they went to Jerusalem. Let's read the text;

'After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the

east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Why did they go to Jerusalem? Because they knew that the Messiah was to come from Israel, so they went to the capital of Judea, which was Jerusalem, and simply asked Herod.

So who were these men? They were great men of their time who would have been revered for their ability to foresee events as astrologers, and they had been told to look out for a Messiah. They didn't become 'kings' until about the third century, possibly as an embellishment to fulfil the prophecy in Psalm

72:11 ('may all kings bow down to him') - and they get names (Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar) in the eighth century - and, as I say, that is not in the gospel anyway. The word used by Matthew in the Greek is 'Magi', which would have been our word for astrologers; they were, in effect, star-gazers. They would have been familiar with Old Testament prophecy because we read in Daniel 5:11 'There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.'

This man is Daniel himself, and he had probably told people what to look out for when the Messiah appeared - a certain confluence of planets and a rising of a particular one. This one was probably Jupiter, the 'king' of stars, as it was particularly bright and would make sense of what the Magi were saying. Now the text says that they saw his star 'rise' in the East, which again makes sense, because they didn't have sextants and telescopes, so they watched the horizon for planetary movement, and thus would have seen the star rising above the horizon.

So now we have the Magi in Jerusalem really upsetting Herod, who clearly didn't know his scriptures as he has to call all the wise men

and priests together to tell him the answer to the question - 'where is the Messiah to be born?' Micah 2:5 has the answer;

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Let us look at the likelihood of there only being three men. These men apparently came from Parthia, which was an ancient kingdom which lay south-east of the Caspian Sea in present day Iran. Parthia was at war with the Roman Empire over the succession of Armenia, so these men would have been entering hostile

territory, in a war zone, carrying expensive gifts, and alone. I doubt that very much. There would have been at least a whole camel train of them for protection. The reason we only hear of three is that there were only these three highly significant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now we have to explore the bit about the star coming to rest over the place where Jesus was. The Greek in Matthew 2:9 says that the star 'stood over the place where Jesus lay'. We still use this terminology of star motion; they rise to their zenith, stand for a while, and then set - dropping back down to the horizon.

There is still more to discuss. We have to get rid of the idea that the Magi were visiting Jesus at the time of his birth.

Matthew's account tells us that the Magi visited him in a house; 'On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.' Not 'baby' note.

It is likely that Jesus was about two years old at the time the Magi came, because Herod went into a fit of jealous rage when the Magi failed to return to him; 'When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were

two years old and under.' This would not have been many. It is reckoned that the population of Bethlehem was probably about 300 people, so the number of boys under two was likely only half a dozen or so; to that you must add those from the surrounding area - say 20 or 30 at most. Nevertheless, one is too many.

So although there may have been the most wonderful selection of animals, shepherds, on-lookers, donkeys - and of course, Jake - in the stable, there were no Magi.

Now that I have ruined certain carols for you for all time, bear in mind that traditions are usually built around truths, and the embellishments we seek are not to be found in

Matthew's gospel. It tells a different story - but an important one, nonetheless.

Why is it only found in Matthew's gospel? I have yet to find an explanation for this in any commentary, but Matthew's account is very much aimed at the Jewish community of his day, while the other gospel writers had other agenda. Luke was writing for the *Gentiles*, and Mark jumps straight into Jesus' adult ministry with no mention of his birth at all. John is all about the mystery of God wrapped in human form.

Matthew, therefore, has a vested interest in showing the hatred engendered by Jesus in the Jewish population, right from his birth

onwards. The massacre of the innocents (as it is called) is horrific, but totally in keeping with the paranoid personality of Herod the Great - also called Herod the Wicked. He had one his wives killed, three of his sons killed, his son-in-law killed, 300 military leaders killed - and so it goes on. All to protect his kingdom, which, when he died was divided up by the Romans and given to three of his remaining sons and his sister.

The Massacre is referred to by Macrobius, one of the last pagan writers in Rome. In his book *Saturnalia*, wrote: "When it was heard that, as part of the slaughter of boys up to two years old, Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered his own son to be killed, he [the

Emperor Augustus] remarked, 'It is better to be Herod's pig [Gr. *hys*] than his son' [Gr. *huios*]" Macrobius may have had some of his historical facts garbled, but he could have given us a chronological key as well. If he was referring to the death of Herod's son, Antipater, in 4 BC, the slaughter of the Innocents would have been one of the last, if not the last, brutal killings of Herod before he died. What is also interesting is the word-play in the quote attributed to Augustus- "pig" and "son" are similar sounding words in Greek. Herod would not kill a pig because he kept kosher, at least among the Jews; yet he had no qualms about killing his own sons!

I have tried this morning to give you, once more, some flesh on the often apparently dry bones of scripture. There is no doubt, as we have found out, that Jesus was a real person, and in the opinion of many millions of people around the world, also God incarnate - God in human form. From the very outset the world tried to kill him, to ensure his extinction, so that his grace would never be known to us, and the power of his salvation never experienced in the daily lives of men, women, and children throughout the world. The world, and the power of this world, which Paul tells us is Satan, failed. Ephesians 6:12 reads, 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities,

against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

But remember what John said in the gospel we read last Sunday, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

Thanks be to God.