The Epiphany of Our Lord

THERE CAME MAGI FROM THE EAST

About 80 miles south-west of Teheran in Iran is the town of Saveh. Two thousand years ago, when Iran was called Persia, Saveh was the site of one of the most important astronomical observatories in Asia. It was still there many centuries later when the Persian chronicler al-Khazwini visited and saw rooms full of astronomical instruments, globes and telescopes, as well as a vast specialist library. The people of Persia were Zoroastrians, and the members of their priestly caste were called 'Magi'. English versions of the Bible translate Magi as 'wise men' or 'astrologers', but in the original Greek text Matthew does not translate it; he retains the Persian word, and uses it to describe the visitors from the east who came to worship the new-born Messiah. The travel writer, William Dalrymple, visited Saveh in 1986 when he followed the journey made by Marco Polo from Jerusalem to Zanadu in China in the thirteenth century to meet the Great Khan. In his book *In Zanadu* Dalrymple recounts his own journey, and says that St Matthew's original readers would have understood that the visitors from the east were Zoroastrian priests from Persia.

Some years ago I visited Ravenna in Italy to see the wonderful Byzantine mosaics in the churches there. One of them, St Apollinare Nuovo, has on the north wall of the nave a mosaic of the Magi. I didn't think they looked quite right because they are shown wearing trousers, tunics and pointed felt caps, quite unlike the traditional image of kings wearing crowns. However, this turns out to be the distinctive dress of the ancient Persians as I saw for myself when I visited the Persian exhibition at the British Museum in 2006, and the

gifts that they brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh, were common Persian temple offerings.

Scholars have tended to regard the story of the visit of the Magi as symbolic. For example, John Fenton says it is Matthew's way of introducing the main theme of his Gospel that the Jews will reject Jesus but the Gentiles will accept him; it is pretty clear that Fenton is not convinced that the visit actually took place. Matthew includes it because for him the story of Jesus happened as it did because that is what the prophets foretold, in this case Isaiah who declared concerning the new Jerusalem: 'nations will journey towards your light and kings to your radiance … laden with gold and frankincense.' *(Isaiah 60.3, 6)* Until I read Dalrymple's book I went along with this view, although it seemed to me very unsatisfactory to say that Matthew had invented such a wonderful story. If he had invented that, what else had he also invented? But if Dalrymple is right, then the story may well have some basis in fact, and if it does then Matthew is simply being true to the Biblical tradition which insists that it is through events that actually happened that God discloses his nature and we experience his truth. Reality is a sign that points to the divine. John Fenton offers one reading of that sign; how else might it be read, particularly if it was indeed an actual event?

I think it points to the unity of the spiritual quest. The Zoroastrian Magi were astronomers, and like the Jews they believed in the coming of a Messiah. For them it was Shaoshyant, the son of Zoroaster, whose virgin birth, announced by a bright star, would herald the beginning of the reign of justice. Christians understand the virgin birth as the divine sign of a new beginning; it speaks of a wonderful new initiative, of God breaking into the world and re-ordering its ways.

It matters not whether we are are Christians or Zoroastrians, Jews or Muslims, we all hope for a new beginning both for ourselves

personally and for our world. We all share a similar spiritual quest (although we pursue it in different ways), and at the beginning of his Gospel Matthew gives us a beautiful picture of the adherents of one faith recognising their truth in the teaching of another. In another of his books, *From the Holy Mountain*, William Dalrymple gives a modern example. He describes a visit he made a few years ago to a Christian monastery at Saydnaya in Syria where Muslims worshipped alongside Christians. They did so in their own ways, but it was the same God they worshipped, in a shared sense of devotion and a common spiritual quest.

I find myself challenged by stories such as these to re-think our claim to be the only purveyors of truth, and I often reflect that had I been born in India or Iran I might now be a priest of a different faith. In a world beset by religious fundamentalism, which is essentially a state of spiritual blindness to the truth of others, Matthew offers us a different vision, a vision of openness to the truth of other ways. Religious blindness was an element in the crusades and countless European wars in the Middle Ages, in our own time it is part of the story of 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq and its continuing fallout. We need the openness of the Magi not just personally but politically. We are all on the same journey; there is one God, but there is more than one way.*

The story of the Magi also points to the Messiah as our healer. When Marco Polo arrived at Saveh (around 1260AD) he discovered that the people knew all about the Magi for they were buried in Saveh, and he was shown their tombs. He gives them their traditional names of Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, but what is most interesting is what he says about the gifts they offered. The Magi offered gold, frankincense and myrrh to discover if the child was God, or an earthly King or a Physician, as Marco Polo explained: 'For, they said, if he take the gold, then he is an earthly King; if he

take the incense then he is God; if he takes myrrh he is a physician.' (In the OT myrrh is referred to as an embalming herb, and that is why we associate it with burial, but in Persia it was associated with healing.)

The child, of course, accepted all three gifts thus showing that he is True God, True King and True Physician. There are not two gods, as the Zoroastrians believed, nor indeed a pantheon of Gods as the Greeks believed, but One God. It is he alone who creates, and rules, and heals.

Too often our God is too small, and that is part of the problem of the fundamentalist view. We need to be reminded that God is greater than our imaginings. As St Paul said, 'in him we live and move and have our being.' He is unimaginably more than we can conceive, not an earthly king but a divine ruler, the creator of all that exists. In Bethlehem, the Magi who watched the heavens knelt before him who made the heavens, and yet the creator of the heavens is also the One who comes close to us in healing and forgiveness. As it says in the Koran, he is closer to us than the vein in our neck.

We hear too much of God as Lord and King, both dominant and powerful images; we need to hear more of God as Physician, the one who heals, for healing is the world's most urgent need.

The fundamentalist view affects more than our religion and our politics. It is reflected in our individualism, which means that my wants set the agenda, and my truth is non-negotiable. No wonder our society is fractured and everywhere bears the wounds of excess. Excess seems to produce a moral meanness which means that the cries of the poor and hungry fall on deaf ears.

Zoroaster was known as the Divine Healer, and while the Christian West developed the idea of *Christus Rex*, Christ the King, the East retained the old idea of *Christus Medicus*, Christ the Physician. It is an understanding we need to regain. We need

healing; we need to be able to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters, and to learn from their truth. The child the Magi worshipped is the divine healer, and at its deepest Christ's healing is through his death, and this brings together the two symbolic meanings of myrrh. Only a suffering God makes sense of our world, and only his wounds can heal it. I'd like to think that the Magi glimpsed this, for they went home another way.

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* It is tempting to argue that the Magi, by their homage, acknowledged the Christian way as superior to theirs. My own feeling is that, while I believe that Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life,' and that we come to the Father though him *(John 14.6)*, we need to learn that this is not a conviction that can be imposed upon others, but which arises out of a life lived according to his example. And we need the humility to recognise in those who follow another way the same fruits of faith as described by St Paul *(Galatians 5.22–23)*, even if they do not name God as we do. The arrogance that Christians have too often shown in propagating the faith has not served us well, nor is it true to Jesus, who came among us as one who served.