

EPIPHANY

John Henderson - 5th January 2003

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany: The festival of the showing of the light of Christ to the nations

Greek: Epiphanos: showing the light

Matthew is the most Jewish of all the four gospels. It is he who sees and quotes the Old Testament prophets as being fulfilled in Christ. It is Matthew who tells us of the visit of the wise men from the east, the story of the flight into Egypt, the massacres of the innocents and the return from Egypt to Nazareth. Whilst being the most Jewish of the gospels, it is the most universal and it is also the gospel of the mission of Jesus and the church to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. It is Matthew in chapter 5, who speaks of Christians being the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”. Jesus heals all people, all who come to Him, Jew or Gentile. The Good News is told to all people.

What do we really know about the 3 wise men from the east? Actually, very little, other than what Matthew tells us. We presume 3 men because of the 3 gifts they gave. These relics are said to be in Cologne Cathedral in Germany, but this is doubtful, to say the least. We do know something of their beliefs from those of their times. The astrologers divided the sky into 4 quadrants, east, west, south and north. If a great event occurred it would show in the stars in quadrant. So Jesus’ “star” was in the east quadrant, and the wise men came from the east to see the king whose star they had seen in the east quadrant of the sky. Herod was naturally upset about this. He was king of the Jews. So he tricked the wise men into leading him to Jesus, but they were worried and returned home by another way.

What was the importance of the wise men? Why in the most Jewish of all the gospels is Matthew at such pains to emphasize the wideness of God’s mercy, His revealing the Christ to the Gentiles? My guess is that, like in Luke’s gospel, he was concerned to help Christianity to break out of Jewish mould. Christianity was originally seen as a sect of Judaism. Christians had first to be Jews, and then Christians. Paul helped Peter to see that the Church was bigger than Judaism. It was for the whole world. Israel was to be “the light to the nations” and now she was fulfilling that God-given role. Jesus, God’s “Light to the world” was, through His Jewishness to be revealed to the nations as their saviour, the saviour of the world.

In the New Testament lesson, Paul goes to great lengths to show that salvation is for Jew and Gentile alike. It is for anyone who places their trust and hope in Jesus Christ. “Pagans now share in the same inheritance”. They too are part of the Body of Christ, the Church. In a sense we are here today because of both the wise men at the Christ child’s home and the efforts of Paul in his mission to the Gentiles. Were it not that Christianity broke out of the narrow mould of Judaism, it would have remained a Jewish sect, and could easily have been suppressed by the Jewish religious authorities. Instead it spread all over the world, to embrace Jew and Gentile in the love of God.

So let us thank Matthew today for recording this incident in the life of Christ Jesus. Let us thank the gospel writers and Paul and the others, including Peter, for recognizing that Christianity was wider than a Jewish sect. Let us give praise and thanks to God that we too share in the promises to Abraham, to the Patriarchs and the Prophets and in the saving work of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

So let's not get in a flap about whether the star of Bethlehem was Haley's Comet, or another comet, or an asteroid or whatever. Let's not worry whether the Wise Men were three or thirty in number, or whether even they existed at all. Let us rather rejoice, that Matthew put this incident in to show that salvation is for all humankind, including us, and thank God for His love and faithfulness as shown to us in Jesus Christ, that we can come together today as people who are of the household of God, because we have put our hope and our trust in Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Saviour and share with Israel in the hope and promises of God.

Alleluiah

Amen