

WISDOM FROM THE EAST

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Solemn Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 6 January 2019, Feast of the Epiphany**

In my home as a child, it was Dad that made the tea in the morning. He would go downstairs to the kitchen whilst Mum snoozed in bed, returning to their bedroom armed with two cups of tea. This I took to be a universal practice. Until, as a teenager, a woman told me how she got up to make the tea for her husband. I was deeply shocked by this eye-opening revelation. It hadn't occurred to me that it might be different in another home. As children, what we take to be normal is just our parents way of doing things.

It's often the same with our religion, and it's the same with the Epiphany story. "Three Kings from Persian Lands afar...". They have names too: Balthasar, Melchior, Casper. This we absorb from our school nativity plays and church crib tableaux. Then we learn in fact there are no Kings in the Gospel account. Wise men bring gifts, according to Matthew's Gospel. Three gifts are mentioned, so three wise men. But Kings? Names, crowns, one white, one black, one Asian – these are all wonderful additions to the story, revealing the significance of Christ's birth.

Christians in south-eastern Turkey have a different legend. The area of Turkey is called Tur Abdin. It's where they still speak Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. The area was once a flourishing Christian civilisation with many monasteries and churches. Today the Cathedral city of Hah is a shadow of its former self. These Syriac Christians have their own legend about the wise men. Twelve kings from the East gathered at Hah. A select three went on to Bethlehem bearing gifts to greet the newborn Christ. A grateful Mary, mother of God, gave them a piece of the baby's swaddling clothes. When the three kings returned to Hah, the holy baby-wrap turned to gold. Awed by this miracle, the Kings founded a great church.

It turns out they are not the only ones to claim there were more than 3 wise men. Michael the Syrian, known as St Michael the Great, names 11 kings: Dahdandur, son of Artaban; Shuf, son of Gudfar; Arshak, son of Mahduq; Zarwand, son of Warwadud; Aryo, son of Kasro. You get the idea. It's like a list from Lord of the Rings.

I love the richness of the traditions surrounding the wise men. The three Kings we are most familiar with represent the leaders of the world coming to worship the new born king. Today we might say a King, a President and a Prime Minister. Today at least one needs to be a woman.

All of this is extrapolation from what the Gospel of Matthew gives us. And it's wonderful.

There is one key detail that is clear in Matthew's account. The Magi were foreigners. They come from "their own country" and they do not know the Holy Scriptures that would have guided them directly to Bethlehem. It's wonderful that none of the characters in the Christmas story are actually Christian. Most of them are Jewish. The wise men are from a different religious tradition altogether. Perhaps Zoroastrian priests from Persia. They are from a different religious tradition, but they are the ones who get it right and journey to Bethlehem unlike the religious establishment in Jerusalem.

Meeting Christ in the stranger, seeing Christ in the Other is a key part of our tradition. As you may know, St Benedict made it central to his rule on hospitality. With our tendency to be afraid of what is different, with our unconscious bias towards people who are like us, it is deeply important to nurture our ability to see Christ in the stranger.

Living in a place like Hong Kong helps. Cities like Hong Kong are the crossroads of the world.

London is the same. The wonderful diversity means we are all part of one minority or another and we have the opportunity to meet people from traditions very different to our own.

This was my experience living in Hong Kong for some years. One of my favourite places in Hong Kong was the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre. It is a centre for study, retreats and dialogue. The buildings are traditional Chinese architecture. The Chapel looks like a Chinese Temple. The logo of the centre is the ancient symbol of Chinese Christianity: a cross on a lotus flower. The lotus flower is a Buddhist symbol of enlightenment. The cross, for Christians, is the way to enlightenment.

Tao Fong Shan was founded as a Christian Mission to Buddhists by the Norwegian missionary Karl Reichelt. He arrived in China in 1903 with negative notions about non-Christian religions, but he soon developed an interest in Chinese religion, particularly Buddhism. He made many friends in Buddhist monasteries. And he founded Tao Fong Shan as a place where Buddhists could meet Christians in an atmosphere of friendship. The Chinese architecture was so Buddhist monks would feel at home in familiar surroundings.

Reichelt's experience, and that of many Western missionaries, has been described as the "conversion of the missionaries". That doesn't mean they abandoned their Christian faith to become Buddhist or Daoist, but they were converted to a larger faith – a Christian vision which discovered that God is present and active in all cultures.

And that was my experience in Hong Kong. I was one of the regular Anglican clergy not a traditional missionary, but my faith and view of God was enriched through meeting people of different religions.

Gifts from the East are at the heart of the Epiphany. Many of us have been blessed by the gifts of wise men and women from the East. It's a common experience for Christians to learn more about their own tradition through encountering another tradition. Daoist insight about service. Buddhist insight about compassion. Zen insight about non-duality. These can teach us about service, compassion and the nature of God in the Christian tradition. If you are still choosing your New Year resolutions, how about learning about a different belief system?

There's a story I like that captures these Epiphany revelations. An enquiring soul went to a religious fair at the big exhibition centre where he lived. The vast range of world beliefs were represented. Including the Bahullah religion. The Bahullah priest explained how the Messiah had come to Bahu in the 5th century and taught the true nature of God. Leaving the exhibition, the enquirer was overwhelmed by the what he had seen and heard. He became angry with a God, "God you are an exclusive God. Sending your Messiah to a certain country in a certain century. What's wrong with my country and my time?" God replied. "A temple is sacred to show that all places are sacred. A festival is holy to show that all days are holy. The Messiah is divine to show that all people are divine."

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