

Stupiphany

Epistle: Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany

Every year, the editors of Merriam-Webster announce a list of new words being added to their dictionary. Recently they have added *grammable*: suitable for posting on Instagram, *wokerati*: which probably doesn't need defining, and *adorkable*: socially awkward in an endearing way.

This has led others to offer their own new words such as *inoculatte*: to imbibe vast amounts of coffee, *giraffiti*: vandalism spray-painted very high, and my favourite, *stupiphany*: the realisation that you have made an idiotic mistake.

Did the wise men experience a stupiphany as they sought the new king of the Jews?

The story of the wise men is a well known and much loved part of the Christmas story. The interesting thing is how little we really know about this event and how much is ingrained in our imaginations. The visitors were not, as that famous hymn tells us kings, but philosophers or holy men. Matthew calls them wise, which means they were intelligent, learned and deep thinking, but when it came to ordinary common sense, it could be said that they had their failings. I've known a few people like that.

But whatever else they were, they were shrewd observers of the night sky who looked for signs of decisive events in the stars. And Matthew tells us that when they saw a new star rising in the western sky they interpreted this as a sign that a new king had been born in Judea. So they set out to find and honour this new king.

But then they made their first mistake. Assuming that a king would be born in power and glory, they went to the city of Jerusalem, a place full of corruption. They then sought out the palace of Herod, the Roman appointed king of the Jews who used fear and terror to hold onto power. On meeting Herod, they asked to see the new king, thinking he must be a member of Herod's family – another big mistake. This is comparable to a delegation going to the Kremlin today and asking Vladimir Putin, "Where is the *new* leader of Russia? We have come to offer our allegiance". Sure enough, when Herod heard about this new king he was badly shaken, and all of Jerusalem trembled with him.

There is a church some distance from here that puts on an annual

Christmas pageant, which differs from the normal simple event of many churches with children in dressing gowns and angels with wire halos. This is an adult performance held on the village green in which community leaders play the main characters. One year the men who were playing the wise men decided that as mysterious visitors from the east they should arrive in swirling clouds of incense. So they took a thurible, which is a metal container that some high churches use to burn incense; and as they were waiting in the church for their cue they lit the thurible and were surrounded by smoky clouds of incense. Then they headed out across the green towards the manger.

What they didn't realise was that they had accidentally set off the church's fire alarm, which was connected to the local fire department. So as these wise men were walking slowly towards the manger, suddenly a fire engine arrived with sirens blaring. Soon firemen began unrolling their hoses among the startled shepherds and angels. Eventually the fire chief saw the wise men surrounded by smoke and incense and realised what had happened. In a loud voice heard by everyone he bellowed, "You wise men are setting off alarms all over town"!

Matthew would agree, for that's exactly what happened. The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem and their enquiries about a new king set off alarms all over the town. Why? Because the last thing the world's most powerful and luxury-filled people want is what they need most: a Saviour, to release them from their sins. God knows that the one who rules by violence and fear is the one who most needs to give himself up to the justice, compassion and grace that this child brings to the world.

And here is where the wise men had their stupiphany: They realised that they had come to the wrong place and the wrong person. But fortunately, with the help of some scribes and Biblical scholars they learned that scripture had promised that Israel's Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They also had the help of that blazing star, which led them to the place where Jesus was. And there they paid homage to the true king and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The wise men's wanderings makes one wonder if we too sometimes go to the wrong place in our search for Jesus. We may seek him in high places, but we are unlikely to find him places of wealth or power, and we should not expect to experience him among the extravagant celebrations that some people hold at Christmas or New year. If we want to find our king, we will have to look in other places.

If we travel to Sudan, or parts of Syria, to the camps where displaced people and orphaned children live with hunger, sickness and loss of hope, we will find him there among the least of his creation. Or we could go to Gaza, Ukraine or any other region where people are experiencing terrorism, war, or its aftermath. If we look carefully we may see him weeping with a mother who has lost her family, comforting a terrified child, or holding the hand of a dying soldier, who wonders at that moment what his death has been for.

But we needn't go as far afield as Africa or the Middle East. Visit the local hospitals and you will find him among the people dying from cancer or other incurable diseases. Walk the streets of our towns and cities and look for him among the homeless, the drug addicts and others with little hope. And what about here in our village? Look around, and you may see him alongside a child who is being bullied at school, sitting quietly with a person whose marriage is falling apart, or standing at the graveside grieving with those who have lost a loved one. Wherever there is need, wherever there is suffering, wherever people need love, that is where we will find our king.

So let us go with the wise men to Bethlehem. Let us go with our gifts of compassion, humility and care. Let us go and worship the One who was not born among people of power, who was not born in a king's palace but who one day the whole world will bow down to and worship: the King of mercy, grace and love.

Amen

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