

Sermon on Sunday 7 January 2024 by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

St Matthews brief narrative of the visit of the Magi swoops down into the Gospel story out of nowhere, delivers its gifts and then vanishes into the desert night, leaving far more questions than answers. No other Gospel repeats it, no other New Testament passage refers to it. Perhaps that is why so many colourful traditions and so much creative art – music, poetry and painting – have tried to give flesh and blood and breath to these unnamed strangers.

This is my contribution, the imagined reflections of a university academic in Mesopotamia, writing around what we would now call the year 30, Common Era.

“The memoir of Orodes, son of Melchior, Professor of Astrology, University of Susa.

My late father was a respected scholar and I am proud to have followed in his footsteps. But one troubling incident always cast a question mark over his reputation. As a child I remember the time my father went away. It was 30 years ago now. He had been working on a treatise on moving stars out in the western sky, and suddenly he requested a Sabbatical,

permission to leave his regular duties for 6 months and travel to Jerusalem.

I remember well how I missed my father, and my mother's anxiety, especially when he did not return at the expected time. There was some scandal, some controversy at the Faculty of Astrology; I knew how much it upset my father, but he never talked about it. All he told us children was a strange tale about a rare bright star in the western sky, an ancient prophecy of a new King, an implausible encounter with an astounded carpenter and his wife and child in a town called Bethlehem, a supernatural warning to take a different route home. It sounded like a fairy tale. What dreams and wonders were these? We were children, we were used to fairy tales.

Thirty years have passed. Now I can access the records at the University, I can see why there was controversy. Why had three senior members of the Faculty all taken a long Sabbatical at the same time? Why was it all arranged at such short notice? Why was nothing written, nothing published afterwards, no scholarly papers telling what they had learned, no correspondence with their fellow academics at the Astrology college in Jerusalem.

And there was some trouble with expenses. Last minute changes to tickets, lodgings booked for a return

journey that took a strange detour instead of the usual planned route, and three big payments for 'gifts' that nobody could quite explain.

There was a diplomatic issue too. This was back in the days of Herod the Great, remember, when travel to the west was easier, the trade routes were busy, and the Kingdom of Judea still had a degree of independence. Dad and his friends had followed the protocols when they arrived, and presented their credentials at the Palace, but at the end of the trip they had just sneaked off into the desert without a word of farewell. There had been protests at government level. Our government had removed certain records from the University, and declared the whole thing 'sensitive'. What has my father been doing?

How did any of this tie in with that magical, starlit tale of my childhood memories.

This year, something new happened in the sky. It should not have happened, our studies of the paths of the stars did not forecast it. A sudden, unexpected and total eclipse of the Sun tracked across the western desert and fell over Jerusalem.....on a springtime Friday afternoon. What wonders were these? Could this be a new chapter of my father's story?

But surely there was no new King. Herod was long dead, and Judea was firmly under Pilate's Roman direct rule. The border was militarised, the old trade routes were quieter. Yes, Herod's son, another Herod, was titular King of Galilee, but he was a vacuous Roman puppet, not the kind of man the stars would align for. Where was the King my father has travelled to acclaim?

So I too took my leave and travelled west. It was risky, with no visa and no plausible reason to travel. A friend advised me to time my arrival for Pentecost, a festival of pilgrimage for the Jews. Nobody would notice one more foreign tourist turning up. 40 days would be ample time for the journey.

I arrived in a busy and excitable Jerusalem, an alien place for a Parthian like me, but I could get by with a bit of Greek and Aramaic. On a Sunday morning a group of prophets or preachers had gathered a crowd and an unexpected sound caught my ear. A Judean was speaking fluent Parthian, and proclaiming a new King. Not the birth of a King, but a rebirth, a resurrection. A King who fulfilled the ancient prophecies, if only the people would see them in a new light. A King whose power came not on the edge of a sword, but in tongues of fire and winds of change.

Many scoffed, many believed. When that long day was over I sought out that preacher. His name was

Matthew, a customs official. Perhaps he has learned his Parthian down on the eastern frontier, where our merchants came in through the Jordan valley. He told me his story, all he knew of an amazing Galilean, a carpenter's lad called Jesus who had turned his life on its head, and who now had turned death on its head.

And I told him my father's tale, and he listened, astonished, and nodded his head. 'Born a King in Bethlehem....as our prophet foretold.'

This was the beginning of the reign of the new King. This was the fulfilment of my father's journey. But now it was my journey, and this time there was no going back home by another road. There was no going back at all. I was called to go onward, no longer following stars, but following a Saviour into a new Kingdom, a Kingdom that welcomed the whole world.

I wonder if Matthew remembered me, if he ever passed on the story I told him of my father's journey, the star, the gold and frankincense and myrrh. Or did it just remain an old family tale to tell my children one day – a tale of long ago and far away?"

The memoir ends here.

And what of us, as our Christmas season, with its cheering lights and wondrous stories, slips into a New Year? Will you be going back, like the Wise Men of old, to where you were before, cheered but unchanged? Or will you now travel forwards, no longer to seek a child, but to follow a man, one who will lead us along a road sometimes hard and sometimes dark, until we know the brightness of Easter morning's renewal and Pentecost's re-energising. If we get there we shall be changed, and there will be no thought of going back – not by any road.