

EPIPHANY - DISTURBING GIFTS

There weren't three of them and they weren't kings and they didn't have camels. Alerted by a star to Jesus' birth, the magi seek the Baby in Jerusalem. They are summoned to go to Herod the king, alerting him to the birth of a potential rival.

These mysterious Magi who, originating among the 6th century BC Medes from Persia – currently Iran – would have been completely at home in the company of kings. They came from a leisure class with time to study the sky and its astronomical signs. Early Christian writers said the magi were Zoroastrian priests. It was widely believed by the Jews that Zoroastrians prophesied three saviours to be born and the three gifts they bore represented the Zoroastrian motto - 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds.' Their religion forbade sorcery.

Matthew is the only writer to include the visit of the magi. He notes it because he believes that Jesus is the Savior of the world - not just the Jews. While his first chapter outlines Jesus' Jewish roots, we then read of the impact through the magi to Gentiles. These foreigners may have even been the first missionaries. Their initial journey would have been c.1000 miles and would have taken many months even on horseback. Their intention was to worship the newborn king. How did they know about the Jewish prophecies? One thought, many Jews did not return from the exile in Babylon.

The coming of the magi caused a great stir in Jerusalem. Interesting that Herod's priests showed the magi the way, but would not go that way themselves. The Magi then went 6 miles south to Bethlehem where 'they found the child'.

John of Hildesheim, a 13th century monk, writes that Melchior, the smallest in stature, brought gold as his offering which included some of the treasure from the Queen of Sheba's gifts to King Solomon. Another magus, Balthazar, brought incense that had been burnt from aromatic plant materials. Gaspar brought myrrh that was 'like gum from trees'. John of Hildesheim wrote that Gaspar was 'the tallest of person and a black Ethiopian.'

Tradition says that Herod asked them the meaning of their gifts. Their answer? 'Gold is the lord of the material world, and this prophet is the lord of his people. The smoke of incense reaches heaven as does no other smoke, and thus this prophet will be raised to God in Heaven as no other prophet will be. Myrrh is used to heal wounds and sores. Thus God through this prophet will heal the crippled and sick.'

The magi were told by an angel, as they slept, not to return to Herod but to go home another way. This could have been south through Beersheba then east to the great highway – now the route to Mecca. Legend tells us that they were baptized by St Thomas and thereafter spread their faith in Christ.

It is believed by some scholars that the magi are the basis for our gift giving at Christmas. In 274 AD the Roman Emperor Aurelia declared that December 25th was to be 'a day of festivities' because the winter solstice showed an increase in light. Later, the Church of Rome established the birthday of Christ as 'the sun of righteousness'. The Eastern Orthodox celebrate on January 6th, the 12th day of Xmas, because their tradition links Christmas with the visit of the magi.

So what about these dates? Calendars have been changed, while, for example, Caesar Augustus would never have called a census in December. It's far too cold to travel in the northern hemisphere.

And epiphany? It's a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand something that is very important to you. Think now of your epiphanies. One of mine is the very clear recollection of the moment when I knew that I should move from my birthplace to make a new home here by the sea.

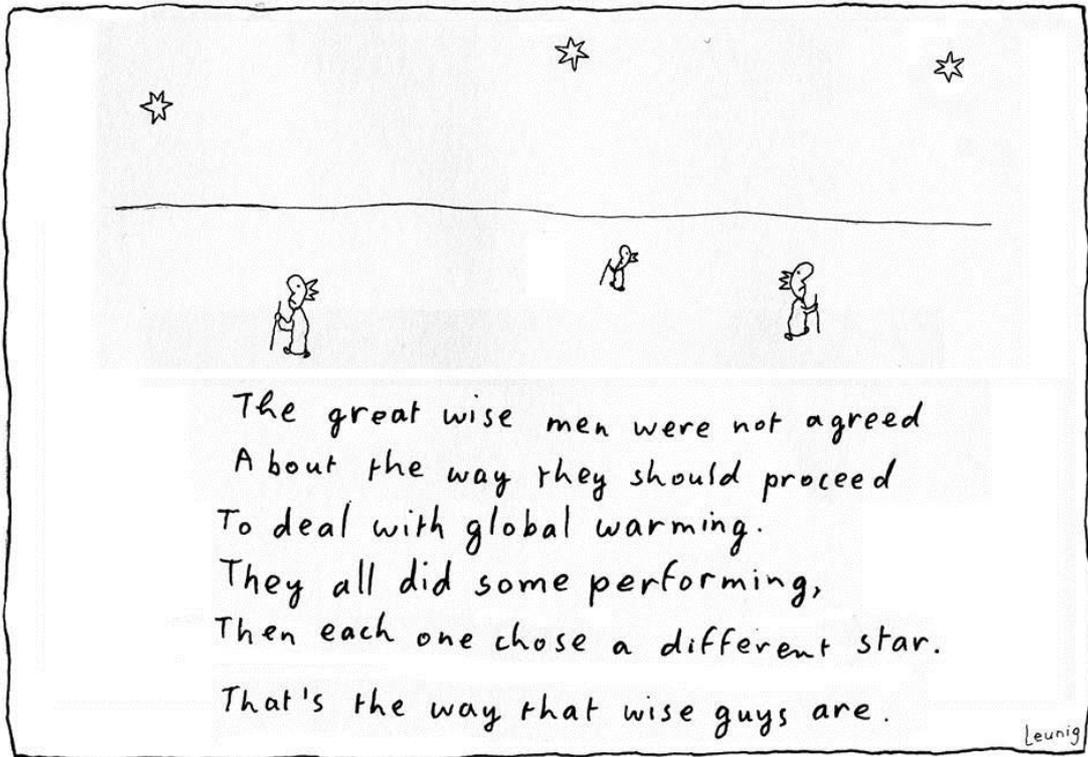
All but the marginal people of Israel largely ignored Jesus' birth. However, people who belonged to a very different culture came to worship. Interesting as we think of our Australian population today. Matthew's Gospel records, 'They saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure-chest, they offered him gifts.'

What gift will we give to Jesus? We all now the feeling of – whatever will I give them? They've got everything.'

Perhaps this simple children's hymn by Christina Rossetti says it all.

'What can I give him poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him
give my heart.' AMEN





The great wise men were not agreed
About the way they should proceed
To deal with global warming.
They all did some performing,
Then each one chose a different star.
That's the way that wise guys are.

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