

## Sermon Epiphany 2021 Matthew 2:1-12

So presumably the Magi didn't live in a Tier 4 area then? Or lockdown? Couldn't have travelled all that way, or met so many people, indoors or out. Yes, they came from the East – but not the South East of England – fortunately.

We are fortunate in a way though – we can still meet the baby of Bethlehem even if we aren't going out or travelling. He is accessible to us on days other than Christmas Day.

One of the interpretations of the coming of the Magi and their ethnic variation is that Christ is for all the world. That seems obvious to us now – but in the beginning we must remember that Jesus was a Jewish bloke speaking to Jewish people in Israel. The Church had moved beyond those boundaries pretty quickly as we read in the Acts of the Apostles and St Paul's letters. But some early sign that this was the right thing from the start was probably desired – and the arrival of the Magi gave that (remember that the Gospels were written *after* Paul's letters). Just as well, because we are here today worshipping the child, the man, the Christ, the God because of that belief that Christ came for all people. It's surprising how often then we in the Church have managed to exclude people because we think they don't fit, don't behave properly, or are beyond the pale.

But the Christ being for everyone is a big point made by St Matthew. When you look at Matthew's gospel it has the inclusion of all peoples near the start, in the visit of the Magi; and it has Jesus' words to go to all nations in the last verses of the last chapter (28:16-20). In 2017 the Archbishops of Canterbury & York spoke of a "radical Christian inclusion in the Church".

In the NT the Church is the body of all people who have faith in Jesus Christ and give their allegiance to him. As the new Church of England book "*Living in Love and Faith*" (LLF) tells us: this is not an achievement, or open only to certain "people who meet some standard of behaviour or status. God calls everyone into this community - regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, age, or ability." (LLF223) As the book of Revelation reminds us the community of God includes people from "all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev 7:9).

"There is a radical welcome here, offered to absolutely everyone, without preconditions. The Church is called to reject the forms of

exclusion that mar our world. As Jesus' actions show, this is to be a community that welcomes the poor, the marginalized, the excluded, the deprecated. It is to be a community of radical love and hospitality in which all can find a home. It is to be a community living against the grain of a divided world" (LLF 223).

If we think there is some kind of a boundary to be policed between the Church and the world, then we need to remember three things:

One God loved the world – he loved the whole cosmos so much he sent Christ into it.

Two We ourselves aren't perfect and get everything right and we are not simply "keeping out bad people" if we do this.

Three The Magi pierce that boundary of Jewish identity and religion and proceed to the centre of it all - *Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in*. Are we meek or do we think and act as if we are the business? Are we like the Magi who seem to important people, but bow to Christ? Do we who are not Magi, Kings or maybe even Wise, bow to Christ? Humility is seen in the Magi, and must be seen in us too especially in how we treat other people.

In his genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1 Matthew deliberately includes a number of "outsiders", people who we might expect to be missed out, or glossed over as a bit embarrassing. First of all there are women in the list – and that was unusual, and if there were women you might expect Sarah, Rachel and Rebekah. But no, Matthew includes characters like Tamar (who pretended to be a prostitute in Gen 38); Rahab (who actually was a prostitute, Josh 2); Bathsheba who likely had to comply being called by the king, and commits un/willing adultery with King David (2 Sam 11-12)<sup>1</sup>; and then there's Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite – the book of Deuteronomy decrees that:

*No... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.* (Deut. 23.3-6)

---

<sup>1</sup> Excellent book: *Bathsheba survives* by Sara M Koenig, SCM Press 2019.

Yet there is a whole book in the bible about doing the exact opposite – the book of Ruth – and her great-grandson is King David!

What links all these women? One answer is that they all start off as outsiders, or maybe even gentiles. The ninth-century Syriac commentator Isho'dad of Merv puts it thus:

... because the Apostles were commanded to go forth and preach to all nations, they wished to teach us by the mention of these women, that even the Gentiles had partnership in the descent of the tribe from which the Messiah arose, and that if they repent, there is nothing to prevent them from the full remission of sins, that they may also become the Israel of God. (Gibson (ed.) 1911: 8)

You can easily see that covers at least some of these women<sup>2</sup> but equally they may all have been *accused* of some sexual misbehaviour – and that links them also of course with Mary who was thought by some to have got pregnant by someone other than Joseph (or God!), which is why Joseph thinks about divorcing her quietly (Matt 1:19). St Jerome says something similar to Isho'dad:

In the Saviour's genealogy it is remarkable that there is no mention of holy women, but only those whom Scripture reprehends, so that [we can understand that] he who had come for the sake of sinners, since he was born from sinful women, blots out the sins of everyone. (Jerome 2008: 59–60)

What this tells us, apart from what Jerome thought of them is that in Christ exclusion, oppression, being trolled as we would say today, and marginalization are all contrary to the Way of Christ. Including these important women shows us that God has welcomed all those who are downtrodden, whether by society, by religious or political structures, or by popular hearsay.

---

<sup>2</sup> It is clearer for some of the women than others. Rahab was from the Canaanite city of Jericho (Josh. 2.1). Ruth was a Moabite (Ruth 1.4). The Bible is silent about Tamar's origins, although the wider literary context might suggest she was a Canaanite (Gen. 38.2). The second-century BCE Book of Jubilees identifies her as a non-Israelite, a 'daughter of Aram' (Jub. 41.4; cf. T. Jud. 10.1–2). Bathsheba, however, was almost certainly an Israelite. The Gentile interpretation therefore hangs on Matthew's – admittedly odd – description of her as 'the wife of Uriah', who was a Hittite (2 Sam. 12.9). To identify these four women as Gentiles, however, fails to explain any link with Mary.

But at least three of these people<sup>3</sup> – Rahab, Tamar and Ruth are also lauded as heroines in Judaism<sup>4</sup>. Rahab as a model of faith (e.g. Heb. 11.31; 1 Clem. 12.1); Tamar was a model for converts to Judaism. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4.17–22) and a model convert to Judaism (Ruth 1.16–17).

Jesus continues this tradition, and is the redeemer of those who are on the outside, who, just as the Moabitess Ruth was redeemed by her kinsman Boaz, were once “alien to the courts of the Almighty” and are now brought in as full participants of the grace of God.

All that precedes the story of the Magi – but they now come along and show the ongoing life of that genealogy. These are not just ancestors, gone centuries ago – they speak to us about God’s love for the outcast, the exploited, the sinful and the forgotten. Then the group in Jesus’ family tree is joined by the representatives of people the early Christians may never have heard of before, and they and we have certainly never met. And God welcomes them into the royal presence of Christ the Lord.

We may feel we are in one of those outsider categories of people, or we may not – perhaps we are like the older brother of the Prodigal Son – never been really bad; always done our duty; stayed at home and done the right thing. But unlike him let us also know that we are welcome at God’s heavenly party, not because we have been good and Santa, I mean God, is rewarding us, but because God is good, and loves all that he has made. Let’s learn about including people in from God’s inclusion of so many “characters” in the family tree of Jesus, and especially the bringing of the Wise men, the Magi from far away to join with the Holy Family in Bethlehem. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rahab came to be portrayed as a model of faith (e.g. Heb. 11.31; 1 Clem. 12.1) given her role in the Israelites’ victory over her fellow Canaanites. Tamar was a model for proselytes since the royal tribe of Judah was perpetuated through her. The rabbis often overlooked Bathsheba’s adultery because she became the mother of Solomon. The story of Ruth presented her both as Gentile great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4.17–22) and as a model convert to Judaism (Ruth 1.16–17).

<sup>4</sup> Some notes from Boxall, Ian. *Discovering Matthew: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Discovering series) (pp. 81-83). SPCK. Kindle Edition.