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The Epiphany 2010

This Christmas, Judy brought home a box of chocolates – it was in a beautiful tin box that had a picture of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus and the three wise men kneeling down in front of him presenting their gifts. “I really bought it because of the tin” she told me in a sincere sort of voice and like the wise man I am I simply nodded and kept my thoughts to myself – after nearly ten years of marriage I am learning a few things!

Today the three wise men wander out of the pages of scripture and into our focus. Today is what we call Epiphany and it is the last chapter of the Christmas story that our church reads.

For some, the wise men show up at an inconvenient time – after all some of us have moved passed Christmas and have put things in boxes again and the house looks back to normal. Certainly you won’t see any more Christmas specials at this point on telly.

But here we are – with the story once again of how the wise men see the star and how they go to Bethlehem. When we think of the wise men we imagine them on a starry night rubbing shoulders with the shepherds in the stable, giving presents to Mary and Joseph in honour of Baby Jesus. It is an image that is in your minds because we have seen so many Christmas Pageants and Christmas Cards and chocolate box tins with the image.

Yet, if we look a little more closely you might be surprised at what you see. First of all, when did it really happen? Matthew tells us that the insane King Herod ordered the wise men to search for the baby Jesus and he later ordered the deaths of all the young boys two years old and younger. This tells us that, contrary to what the cards and chocolate tins say, the wise men did not arrive on the night of Jesus’ birth. They came up to two years later.

The second thing that might surprise us is that it was probably a great company of people who came looking for Jesus – a caravan probably made the journey as it was a long journey to make. We may be surprised also in that the three wise men may

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not have been just three – we assume the number three because of the three gifts – and because tradition names them Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior.

I remember years ago someone phoning the church – “I’ve looked all through the Bible for the names of the three wise men and I can’t find them. Where are they?” I felt badly having to tell her that their names aren’t in scripture they are in our Christmas traditions that was a surprise to her.

And we may be further surprised in that they may not have necessarily been all men either in that the term “man” is a term that is used to designate both men and women. So the question for us is just who are these people and why are they wandering into our story just when so many of us are thinking beyond Christmas just now?

The “Three Wise Men” are also known as the “Magi” it is a term that means a wizard or a learned person it’s the root word for “magician” incidentally. They are also referred to as the Three Kings – which they may be as tradition says but the implication is that these are intelligent people who also have some wealth and power. They are certainly noticed by King Herod and their presence disturbs all of Jerusalem so we are told – whoever they are they are people who get noticed by those in power.

They are likely people who were also astronomers – and they see the star rising in the east, which in the ancient world meant that something special had happened and that someone important had been born.

For our part, we see that they are also people of faith who because of the sign go on a journey. A long journey, and probably a dangerous one and they come seeking the newborn king. We forget the dangers of journeys - back then you made a journey because you had to – like Mary and Joseph - or you had to really want to like the magi.

They are people who give costly gifts – and each of them is highly symbolic - gold is a gift fit for a king while frankincense

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which is really tree resin is an ingredient in incense which is used for worship – this honours and recognizes that Jesus is also king but is also our high priest and lastly myrrh which is a preservative and foreshadows Jesus' death – it is used to embalm the body.

Each of the kings is symbolic of the peoples of the earth coming to worship God – this brings to fulfillment the prophecies found in Isaiah where we are told that all the nations of the earth will come to God and will worship him. Tradition tells us also that Balthazar was the youngest king from Africa brought frankincense while Caspar brought gold and represents Asia. Melchior who was the oldest brings myrrh and represents Europe.

But what does all this have to do with real life when so many of us are, after all, trying to put Christmas away?

I think the story is important because the Kings, or the Magi if you prefer - remind us that our faith is a journey. Our journey as Christians is to seek Christ in our hearts – not just at Christmas but every day of our lives – even when the journey is hard and even when it is dangerous.

It reminds us if we decide to make the journey then we better bring a gift. God has given each person a talent and each of us has a calling in our lives and we are to use that in honour of the Christ child – and that is our gift – which will be received by him as more valuable than gold or frankincense or myrrh.

And perhaps the most important lesson that these mysterious magi offer to us is a lesson about faith – and that is that it's not enough to think about faith – it's not enough to just reflect faith journeys mean turning our faith into action – not just studying the stars as the magi did but packing the bags and setting out on the journey.

There are many real life Christ children who need our faithful response – just turn on television to see them.

The story asks us about what we are following in our lives – what are our stars that we follow? What is most important in our

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lives? What do we seek after each and everyday above everything else?

The story warns us if it is not God that we're seeking well then we are in danger of getting lost.

And – oh yes – I nearly forgot – faith journeys are inconvenient. They demand much of us – and they are costly – but the good news is that the magi made the journey and found the Christ because they were led by God, and that the God who places the stars in the heavens will lead us as well.