

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Tate, Priest Associate, at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, on 2 Christmas, Sunday, January 2, 2011.

## I.

A few weeks ago, when we were greening the Cathedral after the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent service, I was assembling the crèche scene, and a woman came up and asked me, “Where are the angels and the shepherds?” I immediately responded, “Oh this is a Matthean crèche.” She was obviously confused by my answer, so I explained that in Matthew’s version of Jesus’s birth, there were no shepherds and no angels in attendance. I went on to say that there actually was no crèche in Matthew’s version. No census and no journey to Bethlehem. No inn, no stable and no manger. In fact, in Matthew’s version, if you look at the text, Jesus was born in Joseph’s family’s house in Bethlehem, and the only people to arrive on the scene were the magi, the wise men from the east, and then the angel who warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt.

Of course, we don’t really know any of the actual details of Jesus’ birth. We don’t even know the actual date of his birth. The Roman Emperor Constantine, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, chose the date of December 25<sup>th</sup> so that there would be a beautiful Christian festival of light to compete with the orgiastic pagan Saturnalia at the winter solstice.

To return to this morning’s gospel passage: why does the Gospel according to Matthew tell the story of Jesus’ birth in this particular way, with magi and stars?

To begin with, we do not know who wrote the Gospel according to Matthew. Biblical scholars are in agreement that much of the source material behind Matthew’s Gospel was originally passed on in Aramaic oral tradition for the first decades after Jesus’ death. The stories were told and retold. The Gospel according to Matthew as we know it was first assembled, written down in Greek, and edited about 75 AD at the earliest. It may have been done by one scribe or more probably by a committee. It was directed to a Hebrew and Greek speaking Jewish audience somewhere in Israel, probably near Jerusalem.

What we do know is that the writer or writers of the Gospel of Matthew had one overriding, specific, clear agenda: to proclaim that that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the direct and explicit fulfillment of the ancient Jewish prophecies that God was going to send a savior to restore all of God’s creation.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it was never the agenda of the writer or writers of the Gospel according to Matthew (or any of the other Gospels, for that matter) to write a biography of Jesus, a factual account of his life. This is especially true of the story of his birth and the arrival of the magi in Matthew’s gospel.

For Matthew, the birth of Jesus is a cosmic event, which transcends time and space, is shrouded in the mystery and power of God, and is the direct fulfillment of thousands of years of divinely inspired prophecy.

In the narrative, one sign of the cosmic and supernatural nature of this event is the dream motif. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to abandon Mary. The wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and reveal where they had found the child, but to return to their own country by another route. Joseph is warned by the Lord in a dream to flee to Egypt. The Lord appears directly to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Herod is dead and instructs him to return with Mary and the child to Israel. And then the Lord warns him in another dream not to return to Jerusalem but to Galilee. For Matthew, these dreams are the Word of the Lord.

Another sign of the cosmic and supernatural nature of this event is that Matthew sees it as the explicit fulfillment of thousands of years of divinely inspired prophecy. Matthew emphasizes that the miraculous birth of Jesus to a maiden had been prophesied by Isaiah. The birth in Bethlehem of Judea had been prophesied by Micah. The star in the sky had been prophesied in the Book of Numbers. The arrival of the non-Jewish magi from the East was a fulfillment of the many ancient prophecies--Hebrew, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian-- that the coming messianic figure would be the savior of the whole world. Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt, fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea that the messiah would come out of Egypt. Jesus in Egypt is the new Moses, and Herod the new Pharaoh, recapitulating the Book of Exodus. Jesus returns from Egypt and grows up in Nazareth, which is attributed by Matthew to some unnamed prophet. For Matthew, all these ancient prophecies have now been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, the messiah of God.

## II.

The famous scholar and writer, Joseph Campbell, once wrote a collection of lectures entitled Myths to Live By. I love the title. Campbell argues that mythology and religion are what give meaning and purpose to human existence. Empirical science can analyze things and events, but can never penetrate what he calls their "inner meaning." In his words: "... [M]ythologies and religions are great poems which point infallibly through things and events to the ubiquity of a "presence" or eternity" that is whole and entire in each. In this function all mythologies, all great poetries, and all mystic traditions are in accord; and where any such inspiring vision remains effective in a civilization, everything and every creature within its range is alive."<sup>1</sup>

The story of the "Adoration of the Magi" in Matthew's gospel is just such a myth, in the most positive sense of the term. Not a myth in the sense of something that is not true, like a fairy tale. But a myth that points to a truth that is beyond words. A myth to live by.

The meaning of the story is not to be found in the scientific accuracy of the things and events described. Whether or not Mary was a virgin. How Joseph understood the angel in the dream. Whether or not there was a conjunction of planets or a super nova in the sky.

Rather, in Campbell's terms, the story points through the things and events described to a "presence" and an "eternity" that is beyond words, beyond understanding, which creates meaning and purpose, which is the essence of what it means to be truly alive and to be

fully human. The star in the sky showing the way. The mysterious magi and their wonderful gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. A cosmic reversal: an ordinary child recognized as the long-awaited messiah of God. A wily King Herod tricked by the wise men and outmaneuvered by a child King. God with us, from before time, now, and forever.

The scene of the “Adoration of the Magi” brings alive the deepest longing in all of our hearts: that we too, like those magi, might be led to the very place where Christ is born into our world, into our hearts. That we might recognize the presence of God in the most ordinary events, like the birth of a child. That we might defeat the forces of evil and death represented by Herod. And that we then might offer suitable gifts as homage, as a tribute of our reverence and fidelity to the savior of the world.

### III.

It is certainly no accident that the “Adoration of the Magi” is one of the most repeated scenes in all of Christian art. One of the very first pieces of Christian art was the “Adoration of the Magi” fresco in the Priscilla Catacomb in Rome, which dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. And down through the ages, some of the most celebrated artists have treated the subject, including Boticelli, Durer, Rubens, Velasquez, and da Vinci among many, many others. Christmas at our house is never complete without listening to Menotti’s “Amal and the Night Visitors.” I would even like to think that the fantastic, over-the-top Christmas lights and decorations in neighborhoods like Roxbury and Oreland, at their deepest level, are an expression of the same “inspiring vision.”

So in that spirit, let me close with one of my favorite treatments of the scene, T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Journey of the Magi.” Note the twist at the end of the poem, when the magus who is speaking remembers back on the nativity scene as a vision of both birth and death: reminding us that it is ultimately only the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ that gives his birth its cosmic significance.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times when we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly

And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt.  
I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.<sup>ii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 266.

<sup>ii</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), p. 68.