

Sermon: 2020/01/06 (The Feast of Epiphany) - *Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; & Matthew 2:1-12_BTR*

Despite what we may sing about this, the *final* episode, in the Christmas story, notice that in our gospel reading from Matthew - the *only* Evangelist to record it - there is but a *single* 'king' mentioned, (not three).

And he is no "magi," but rather Herod "the Great." - dictator, tyrant of Judah. "Puppet"-ruler serving (under) Augustus Caesar.

The wisemen, you see, were almost certainly *not* royalty, but astronomers. "Star-gazers" from somewhere within the Persian empire, where the profession was taken *very* seriously, and often attracted lucrative patronage from the imperial court, who believed that, by studying the various movements and configurations of the heavenly bodies, predictions could be derived about the future:

The emperor would consult these experts about whether he should make war against "this" or "that" other kingdom, about when crops should be harvested, or who he should marry, and so on.

And we can see how well it paid to be such an "expert" by the gifts that the wisemen were able to give to the Christ-child.

Indeed, to Isaiah who foresaw their arrival in Bethlehem centuries before, they probably, to be fair, *looked* like kings - finely dressed in silks and attended to by a large retinue of slaves, eunuchs and concubines.

But let's be clear about their specialism:

It was, in its foundations, a *true* science - a science that had been perfected over millennia in the Fertile Crescent, even as different empires rose and fell.

Those ancients had remarkably accurate constellation maps, and had developed reliable models.

But the divinations - the conclusions and advice - that they drew from such examinations were *pure* charlatanry.

Quackery.

Guesses.

"Leaps in the dark."

This is *abundantly* obvious in the Daniel narrative, where the astronomers with whom that prophet was completing for influence kept "hedging their bets," and flat out refused to answer straightforward questions.

In other words, whilst astronomy is a genuine and useful discipline, astrology is plain nonsense - harmful, even.

Condemned in the Bible: [see, for example: Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10-12; Is. 47:13-14].

It leads people astray and gives false hope and misfounded confidence.

A form of idolatry.

Which is why it is especially marvellous that God should subvert it to use it to reveal Himself!

Where else, then, if we look, will we find Him already hiding in our own lives? In what unexpected "quarters" are His graces already being *abundantly* poured out in my little part of the world if I were to look for them?

Let's take a moment to reflect.