

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY

There can't be many more mysterious figures in all world literature than the three wise men.

Who were these guys?
Where did they come from?
What, exactly, was their job?

All the information that exists about them we heard a moment ago – these few short verses in Matthew's Gospel.

And it's easy to see how over the years we've inserted information about them to try and fill in our gaps in knowledge and create more of a story.

We say there were three wise men – but the Bible doesn't say how many there were.

We're told they came from the east – but we don't know where.

We imagine them travelling on camels – but the Bible doesn't tell us that.

We sometimes say they were kings – no chance that this is true!

We picture them coming to the stable on the same night as the shepherds – but the Bible actually tells us they visited a child (not a baby) in a house (not a stable). So it seems that they came along a good deal later.

And to this we can add one more piece of trivia that I just realised this year.

The Bible doesn't even call these guys the wise men!!!

Even this tiny phrase: the Wise Men, is just one we have created to describe them. Everybody knows who it is we mean, and I dare say they may well have been wise - but these words are not actually in the Bible!

Out of this mysterious tale, however, there are some facts which are pinned down.

First, as part of their journey they visited Jerusalem and had an audience with the current ruler, King Herod.

Second, we know in detail the gifts they presented to Jesus and his family. Given the vagueness of the rest of the story that detail is quite surprising.

Third, we know that in the end they went home by another way – not returning to tell Herod of who they had discovered.

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY....

I don't know what they knew of Herod, other than the fact that he was the acting king of Judea, placed there by the Romans to rule that occupied land. It goes without saying that he would be unpopular.

But add to this the kind of man he was. This was a ruthless individual, greedy to hold on to power who even murdered his own wife and sons to make sure he remained as the man in charge.

You can imagine his reaction then, to the idea of a Jewish king being born. But of course, he has no details, these foreign gents have just turned up with a rumour, and even they haven't found this person. Maybe he doesn't exist.

But Herod needs to be sure. So he turns on the charm.

"How wonderful. This is great news that you are bringing. I would dearly love to worship this new king myself. So when you find him please come back and tell me where he is, so I can pay my own respects."

And so the wise guys leave on the last leg of their outward journey.

They are guided to Bethlehem, and to Jesus, and like Anna and Simeon in our Bible reading last week, they too have the eyes of faith to see that this child is special.

They're filled with joy and gladness!

They present their gifts.

They present their worship.

And then they return to their country by another road because God had warned them not to go back to Herod.

The Bible says they had a dream.

Maybe it *was* a dream.

Or maybe it was a feeling they had that they didn't trust Herod. Maybe they mistrusted him from the beginning.

Whatever it was, they had a very strong sense of God telling them to stay away from that king. And so they go home by another way.

I wonder if you ever think of the implications of that for them.

It doesn't sound like much.

If you are travelling a long distance there are usually a number of routes you could take to reach your destination, even if there might be one that looks like the shortest and most obvious. But there are usually alternatives.

So you might wonder, what's the big deal about going home another way?

The big deal is that you are disobeying a ruthless king.

If this king or any of his officials or soldiers are able to apprehend them, their lives will not be worth anything.

In other words, the decision they are taking is putting their lives at risk.

But they have the faith to take the risky option because they believe that God must be trusted and obeyed - and that the infant Jesus needs to be protected.

And if you think about it,

if the wise men had **not** taken that risky action, and if instead they had returned to Jerusalem, the story of Jesus would have been over before it began.

Here's the interesting thing.
 Life is filled with choices.
 And we can't choose everything. Sometimes we have to take sides.

Saying **YES** to Jesus means saying **NO** to Herod.
 Saying yes to justice means saying no to injustice.
 Obeying what is right means disobeying what is wrong.

Saying yes to Jesus for us means taking a side and making a stand for the things that mattered to him.
 We can't remain aloof to issues of peace or justice or poverty or politics or power.
 Well, we *can* remain aloof – but not if we are serious about being followers of Christ.

The very moment of Jesus' birth poses a question to us all.
 His very existence poses a question to all of us.
 Not just wise men. Not just Herod.

What are we going to do with him?
 Are we going to ignore him?
 Are we going to line ourselves up for him or against him?
 A choice continually needs to be made.

If we choose Jesus, life will be different.
 We too, will be going home by another way.
 Because Jesus brings with him another way to live.

We talk about Jesus as good news to the world.
 And yet there are those for whom Jesus is not good news.
 The people of power.
 The people who think they are in charge.
 The people for whom their wealth and possessions mean most to them.
 The people who care nothing for the poor and disadvantaged.
 The people who think only of themselves.

Jesus has come to our world to encourage us all to set out in a new direction – to live life in a new and better way.

And where do we get this new direction?
 Where do we get the details on how we should live,
 and what matters most,
 and how we treat people,
 and how we relate to God?

We do that by paying attention to Jesus himself and by being alive to God's voice within us.

God always has new things for us to hear.

God is always prompting us,
and guiding us as to how we can best be followers of Jesus.

And that involves opening our mind to new revelation,
appreciating new truth, and finding ourselves on new roads.

Of all people, Christians need to be flexible,
ready to change plans
ready to head in a different way
ready to try new things
ready to challenge authority
ready to hear and respond to what God is saying today

God is creating a new way for us to travel.
Those of us who are Christians may not all be men.
We may not all be wise.
We may not all come from the east.

But we are all on a spiritual journey (because that's an important part of what life is about) and on that journey things change, plans are altered, and new paths are taken.

We have none of us arrived but I pray that with God's help we are all journeying further down the road.

I'm glad that as a Christian my faith has grown and developed and changed over the years.
I'm glad I don't think and believe exactly the same stuff that I did years ago.
I'm glad that God has opened my eyes to things I needed to see and helped change my direction.
And I pray that God will continue to do that for me.

And as we enter this New Year this would be my prayer for all of us.
That we would be on the lookout for what God is saying to us **now**
- not last week or last year,
and be ready to start out on a new path
so that we will be nearer to where God is leading us,
nearer to our true selves,
and nearer to Jesus – the one we seek to follow.

Let's listen out for his voice, that very *different* voice,
and like the wise men,
may we be changed by our encounter,
ready to go home by another way.