

Dear Friends,

Matthew 2: 1-2

“Whoever learns from the magi is worthy of death.” Those words come from a teacher who lived a little before Jesus was born. They show the opinion that some had of magi. They condemned them for what they were and what they did. They were determined to reject and have nothing to do with them. They also condemned those who went to them for teaching or help. All these, they felt, deserved to be executed, destroyed, put to death.

Magi is the word used in the Bible for the visitors from the east who came to Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We often call them the three kings or wise men. They brought three gifts, but it never actually says that there were three of them. They weren't kings and you could argue about whether they were wise.

What they were was magi. Magi is the word from which we get our word magic or magician. They engaged in practices that people may have described as the dark arts. They studied the dark of the night time sky for the messages in the stars and the dark of their night time dreams for the messages in the unconscious. They carried out puzzling rituals and concocted strange potions. Some found them mysterious and sinister. They seemed a bit strange and did things that were not easily understood. Those who were unsettled by them could find them frightening. And when people are frightened of others, they sometimes condemn them and say things like “Whoever learns from a magi is worthy of death”.

Their star gazing led them to see a new star in the sky. Their studies taught them that this meant something. What it meant, they concluded, was that a child had been born and this child was the king of the Jews. They decided to go and find him. When they found him, they would pay homage to him. That is, they would kneel and worship him. They would give him gifts. These gifts would be tokens of their lives which they would place in his hands. They would open themselves to him, make room for him, give all they had and all they were to him.

They travelled to the place where you would expect to find the king of the Jews. They went to Jerusalem. They asked around for where they might find the child so that they could pay homage to him. The word spread about these visitors. It reached King Herod. I imagine he had spies, eyes on the ground, people who were ready to make reports to him. How might he, King Herod, react to the news that visitors were searching for a king, and that king was not him? Did the magi have any idea of the destructive consequences that their search was about to unleash on the innocent people in and around Bethlehem?

God bless you,

Tony