

Before Christmas one or two Christian blog writers produced some intriguing reflections, with titles such as 'The Politics of Christmas'. Now, you might be surprised at Christian writing with that kind of title, for surely politics is the last thing any of us want at Christmas? Politics is about argumentative slanging matches across a despatch box, but Christmas is meant to be about domestic harmony, generosity and love. Well, said one of the blog pieces, Christmas, as we have come to idealise it, is really an invention of the Victorians. It was in part a product of the desire to retain some echo of a rural identity as country dwellers poured in to the cities during the nineteenth century. Our beautiful tree and the splendid church decorations at St. Margaret's all fit with this Christmas heritage. In the process of change the rural background was idealised and romanticised, with the political result that Christmas now confirmed the Victorian social order rather than subverted it. Apparently before the nineteenth century (not many of us know this) there is evidence that Christmas was an occasion for some people to vent their opposition to the ruling classes and the political order. But with the realigned Victorian Christmas this all ceased.

But what about the Christmas stories in Luke and Matthew? Are they politics? Well, a moment's glance will tell you how political they are. Prominent among the actors in the stories are those who visit the new-born child: the shepherds and the Magi (Wise Men). Although we present them nicely in our crib scenes, shepherds are really smelly outsiders, associated with impurity and dirt and therefore disease. On the other hand, the Magi, whose visitation we have liturgically before us today, are depicted as wealthy travellers, noble and wise – they represent the Fellows of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of their day. So here we have two sorts of human beings drawn to kneel before Christ: the uneducated and the educated, the lower classes and the upper classes, the conventional morally suspect and the conventional morally upright. In being drawn to the Christ-child the shepherds acknowledge a new Shepherd-leader for the people and the Magi a new wisdom-leader. Either way, the child is not the current leader, King Herod (and his master in the background, the Emperor Caesar Augustus). The magi find their way to Herod and the new wisdom-leader is not there; he is born elsewhere, not in a palace. So what could be more political than that?

You get a bit more of what's going on in this story by thinking further about the figure of Herod. You need to know 2 things about him: 1) he was not a 100% Jewish but was brought in by the Roman overlords to be the puppet-King of Caesar. Herod was 'King of the Jews' – not a Jewish title, but a Roman one. (For Jews, the Lord God was King). So Herod is not a kosher king and he's therefore suspect. 2) he was not a nice man, and quite happy to execute any number of Jewish inhabitants of Palestine if they got in his way. He built huge palaces for himself, and also one for Caesar by the sea, and he extended the Jerusalem Temple site by a few football pitches in size. All of which cost money and that meant heavy taxation burdens for the peasants. So Herod was not on anyone's Christmas card list! Anyway, for the first Christians, the question it poses is: whom do you recognise as your real leader – this corrupt and ruthless pretender called Herod or someone else whose star shines brighter than any other?

Where lies the source of that justice and peace which God in heaven intends for you? Do you expect it to come from conventionally – a palace; or does it arise from a completely different and may be surprising place – a stable? The question for us could well be: what kind of justice and peace do our political leaders offer and who benefits and who speaks the truth? All difficult questions, because we are at the mercy of our media and as we all know – and there's no bias there! Ha ha.

But what about these Magi? Who are they? They are not kings – in spite of the well-known carol 'We Three Kings...' Some have suggested they are astrologers and some magicians. Well, Matthew has them as Wise Men, that is, learned professors of their day. They are people we should listen to if we want insight into the meaning of life. They carry within them the knowledge and insight of science, philosophy, religion and astrology – and there is scarcely any distinctions for most ancients between those disciplines as we would call them today – and they come to acknowledge the greater wisdom residing within this child. The wisdom they represent is not knowledge in some factual sense, but a spiritual understanding about what things mean, or insight into the best way to live according to the best lights we have. The visitors to the Jesus-child are acknowledging a source of human purpose which pushes beyond what they have known thus far. What wisdom can we call upon if we are searching for a good and fulfilling life worthy of God's hopes for the world?

The magi are a device for Mt's Gospel. They are there to ask us what the source of our wisdom is? Matthew projects Jesus as a teacher and wise guide. But we had better be prepared, for the wisdom of J has been called a subversive wisdom. For example, we may be tempted to think of life as a story of fate: we have been dealt a certain hand and it is for us simply to make the best of it. Not so says Jesus's subversive wisdom. Think of life as a great gift, of God as a compassionate presence, of our lives as overflowing with opportunities for offering praise. If you do that, it will create in you a different outlook – less meanness, less judgementalism, less prejudice, an increase in graciousness, a willingness to entertain truth from unexpected places. Or again, conventional wisdom says 'surround yourself with protective measures against the cruelties of life', pull up the drawbridge, keep out the stranger, look after No.1. But subversive wisdom says that it is in our dealings with one another that God is revealed – in gestures of unsolicited kindness, in being prepared to put on one side long-standing grievances, in putting oneself out for others at a cost to one's own priorities. And so on. All of these attitudes and values Jesus demonstrated in his words and protests and actions, and therefore in the invitations issued to us.

So this is my invitation to you now: what wise man or woman would you celebrate at the present time? Who would be your bearers of wisdom?

Someone gave me the book by Shami Chakrabarti 'On Liberty' for Christmas, and I have to say I have been very taken by it. She is very worried by moves in Britain to pull away from the European Convention on Human Rights. Human Rights means rights that apply to everyone and should not be limited by national interests, for national interests can easily cloak an abuse human rights. Here's a couple of sentences from her book:

‘The balance between lawful and proportionate surveillance on the one hand and respect for personal privacy on the other is the new frontier for all those who care about human rights. And, as always, finding such a balance is inseparable from the preservation of democracy itself, and cannot be reached without universal values and international cooperation.’

These seem to me wise words. And to make the gospel connection, they resonate with the Golden Rule, that we should ‘do to others what we would want them to do to us’ – a rule which had already been enunciated by many religions, including the Jesus-inspired religion over the centuries.

So Shami Chakrabarti is my wise woman this Christmas season. And to throw down a challenge to you: I want you to tell me yours. In order to make it interesting, you should write it down and tell me why (50 words will do), and who knows there might be a prize for the best argued contestant!

Let me draw to a close now. Epiphany means ‘manifestation’ – the manifestation of God’s wisdom to the Gentiles, that is, to you and me. So Epiphany is about extending the reach of God into the world. But the content of that reach in the symbolism of the visit of the magi challenges us to think about what wisdom means now and whose wisdom we should pursue. It challenges us to bend our minds and lives to that subversive wisdom which might help us give substance to our human search for meaning and so bring a sense of praise in our lives which hitherto we may not have fully known.