

5th January 2014 by David Flagg

Matthew 2:1-12 The Journey of Faith from wherever..... to find Christ

Every year the story of the Magi coming, probably from Persia, modern day Iran, to Bethlehem in Judea in order to worship a new king..... every year this story causes me to ponder on the nature of the journey of faith which any of us make, starting from.... our own received culture and belief system.....

so what do followers of Jesus Christ have to say about the other great world faiths?

The Magi, probably a tribe of Median priests, maybe spiritual advisers to the Persian kings (rather than being kings themselves), would have been skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural science, with a natural inclination to astrology. We do know that in the years around the birth of Jesus there were some unusual phenomena in the skies, including a brilliant dog star called Messori, which means "the birth of a prince" we cannot be sure what star the Magi observed, but it would have been one such unusually brilliant star, which somehow spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world.

So they come, making the long and arduous journey to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.....and we can see their journey to find Christ.... as representing all the cultures of the world.....Jesus is not just born a Jew FOR the Jews only.....but for all, whatever their cultures and spiritual traditions.... Epiphany as the Book of Common Prayer reminds us is the "Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles"to everyone

The journey towards and into God has been compared to finding your way up a mountain.....there are many paths and many ways to approach the summit.....Hinduism in particular emphasises that each of us must find our path and stick to that path.....it would be a nonsense to keep going back and trying another way.....

Christians often get stuck here and imply that everyone should be on the same path, supported they think by the saying of Jesus (John 14) "I am the wayno one comes to the Father except through me"; as if this has to be true for every person of whatever creed or culture, wherever they are on their journey. What is often overlooked here is that he was speaking only to the disciples he had nurtured to this point – in other words "the only way for YOU my disciples to find the Father is to come through me". Part of my own journey, which I shall say more about later, has been managing a multi-faith Prayer Room in a large hospital in Woolwich, where I became very close, in particular to Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs; but in my shared discussions and experiences with them, I always found that my own sense of devotion to Jesus was increased rather than weakened.

One of the features of present-day understanding, or lack of it, between differing faiths, is that they have become over-identified with geographically based cultures..... so although Christianity was born in the Middle East, it is now identified culturally more as the religion of the West.....comments like those of George W.Bush about his so-called war on terror as a "crusade" have not helped this perception.

There is a remarkable book called “Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road” describing the inspiring life of Mazhar Mallouhi, a Syrian follower of Jesus who avoids the word 'Christian' because of its Western connotations, and who remains within his own Islamic cultural setting. Mazhar traces his family lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. Strikingly he was strangely drawn to Christ through the life and writings of Mahatma Gandhi – himself deeply influenced by the Jesus of the Gospels. Because of his turning to Christ, Mazhar found himself exiled in Tunisia and was encouraged by Christian missionaries (mainly American) to turn from all of his Islamic thought and practice towards their own, supposedly correct, “Christian”, spiritual and cultural expression. Mazhar soon found that, in particular, Americanised evangelical forms of Christianity were more about a packaged view of western living, than truly following Jesus in a way that was authentic and true to each person.

So Mazhar developed his own way of following Christ, as someone steeped in Muslim culture. Now living in Lebanon, the number of those in Mazhar's wider family and network who are following Jesus is increasing, not 'officially', not as it were registered as 'Christians', rather keeping their culture and following Christ within it.

We could equally say of the wise men, the Magi, that they returned “to their own country”, to pick up again what faith meant in that cultural setting. It is highly unlikely that they ever became “baptised Christians”. But no doubt they would have been changed spiritually by their experience, as TSEliot put it in “The Journey of the Magi”:

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods”

Epiphany then opens the coming of Christ to each place and every culture. We now live in a world which is a global village, and where easy travel means a lot of cross-cultural experience. And the great cities such as London have a number of ethnic groups and faiths living side-by-side. In such urban areas of multi-cultural richness, a shared sacred space in a hospital, becomes a kind of microcosm of world faiths and cultures engaging. I was privileged to share in such a setting as this for some 10 years in Woolwich, and miss it terribly.

Our Prayer Room was a simple, square-shaped room, with a carpeted space in the middle and little furniture except a table which could be used as an altar, a cupboard with holy books to read, and to store prayer-mats, and a pin-board on which visitors left little prayer messages, especially for patients they knew and loved. As different faiths sharing together, we were very united in doing our key task what was how best to care spiritually for our patients, and this prime purpose held us together.

I was once regarded as beyond the pale, by a keen Christian who saw me carrying our buddha along the corridor. I was taking him to a particular terminally ill cancer patient, a Sri Lankan lady who appreciated having buddha on her shelf, and incidentally she also loved Christian prayers and hymns.

Another of my memories is of the Hindu chaplain saying to a patient, "You absolutely must surrender to Jesus" - a good example of the need for any of us to follow the path we have been given. The same Hindu priest would come to our simple midweek communion service. He would be completely reverent, receiving the bread, and then holding up the chalice (he didn't drink alcohol) and repeating, "the blood of Christ". Coming back to the wise men, Jesus accepted the homage of those who came from the east, with a completely different world-view from his own Jewish culture and faith. And the Jesus of the gospels looked very clearly at the attitude of the heart, the humility of spirit, the openness to new truth, rather than interrogating someone to make sure their beliefs were totally 'correct'.

It was just this kind of humility which I observed in the regular prayer-times of my Muslim colleagues.....sometimes they would share the same time and space with the chaplaincy team as we said our midday office on the other side of the room. Busy doctors, simply and bodily redirecting their lives to God, and if they had time sitting quietly for a while after completing their prostrations. Then there was the monthly Sikh music and chanting, followed by the sharing of the warm 'prasad' which they had brought from the temple....sharing food is essential in Sikhism. Even if I couldn't join them, their half-hour of music and chanting conveyed a certain calm through the whole of our office. Through the wonder of such soul-friend sharing in the riches of each other's faith and tradition, we may well see that all the great faiths have treasure and wisdom for us to learn from. So, as the Christ-child received the mysterious figures, the Magi, from afar, I sense that he still welcomes all who are making their own search for God with the light they have been given thus far.

Jesus remains for me, for us celebrating this holy communion, our unique way to the Father, and the Epiphany means (literally) His "shining out" for all the world to see.

One way I make sense of the paradox of only one God and many faiths, sometimes contradictory, is to see Christ as alone fulfilling and completing the searching and yearnings of all religions. In that way, all the paths up the mountain still eventually lead to Him : just as 2014 years ago the Magi entered the house, opened their treasures and fell down and worshipped.