

The star of it all

'When they [Magi] saw the star, they were overjoyed' (Matt 2:10 NIV) or as the RSV and ESV has it 'When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy' (Matt 2:10 RSV & ESV).

How can you miss a star – especially one that moves? If I make an inside star [mini torch light on ceiling] you follow it easily enough. Star gazers know the heavens – they have lots of time to study it – but on this occasion Jerusalem was caught unawares. Why didn't they look up? Many scholars believe that the star was a conjunction of planets so close together that they were exceptionally bright and of course moving. Whatever stellar phenomenon it was, it was able to generate responses in human beings far below on the planet. The wise men saw and followed; the people in Jerusalem heard and stayed put. Both groups agreed however that something new, something different, something momentous was happening.

The wise men followed the direction of the star to a foreign country. Their interpretation led them to Herod – a logical place for a new king – but Herod hasn't noticed the star at all and he is not a new father.

Whoops! Did the star lead astray? How does a star lead anyway? Is it in the shape of a finger pointing like a laser pointer 'there's the place' or is it the town or village beneath the star that counts and you have to do the door knocking yourself? So back on the road they go – the star moves on and they follow until it gets to the place where the child is. And now comes our verse *'When they[the Magi] saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy'* (Matthew 2:10 ESV / RSV) – we get the picture – they're pretty happy – they're at the place.

We have no indication that they've attracted any attention (other than the curiosity we can imagine happening when a bunch of foreigners come into the neighbourhood) and we have no indication that anyone in Bethlehem had any idea what the night sky was saying. So why do these wise men have such joy over a star? I think it was possibly the exhilaration at the climax to the thrill of the chase – or the deep satisfaction at a task well done in the company of friends (their journey probably took longer than a few days – they've quite possibly been on the road for months) – and it was possibly the anticipation of who they would find behind the door – after all they had indicated that they had come to *worship* this new king.

We know from Matthew's account that these wise men then presented their gifts to the child, Jesus. We do not know what exactly they saw beyond the toddler as they bowed down to him but it seems that nothing they saw – star, journey, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, child and his mother – convinced them that they were idiots. Their eyes did not blind them – the delay in Jerusalem did not send them home – and they did not peek around the house door and spot the toddler Jesus and quickly close it saying "Whoops, this can't be the place!" because "the heavens proclaim the glory of God" (Ps 19:1) and in this case revealed a wonder to them.

God's action is always prior to our actions. He acts and empowers us to respond – we are quite capable of being rebellious all by ourselves. God reveals and we believe – no revelation from God, no belief.

It's the same today because seeing and understanding what we see finally needs God's Word to help us see that we're not idiots. Today we look around and see various church buildings, numerous pastors, constantly changing people in the pews but there's always water and bread and wine and a book called the bible and almost always there is a cross or other art. It's all mumbo jumbo stuff unless you realise that the child whom the wise men worshipped became a teacher and healer who wound up dead on a cross accused of heresy and kingly aspirations but who rose again from the dead is God, the King of kings, who still comes to his people whether the roads are covered in snow or the doors are locked or not.

We don't have a star to see but we can still see things – water, bread and wine and bibles – many people miss them because they are so ordinary – but for Christians they are how Jesus rules and reigns, cares and watches over us. That is why we can have great joy – this toddler in Bethlehem is God – here for us – so that we can live by faith and rejoice each day no matter what we see each day. Jesus is God who is easily overlooked. Yet this God is the only One who can truly give us life in all its fullness.