

6.30 PE 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2011  
Epiphany – Year A

Isaiah 60: 1-6  
Ephesians 3: 1-12  
Matthew 2: 1-12

Are you one of those people who gets confused between their left and their right, when giving directions ? Or, are you one of those people who can never remember where is east and where is west ? Do you find it difficult to get yourself orientated ? There's a clue there, because '*Oriens*' is the Latin for 'rising'. An oriental is someone who comes from the east, where the sun rises. If it's morning, the sun will be rising in the east and in the evening it will be setting in the west.

In this country we think of the people of Israel or Palestine as living in what we call 'The Middle East', whereas they think of us as 'The Near West', and the 'The Near East' is modern-day Syria, Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in Old Testament times, these eastern nations were called Assyria and Persia. So, when the Jews were exiled to Babylon, they went East.

There's a striking phrase in the book of Baruch: **Look toward the east, O Jerusalem, and see the joy that is coming to you from God.** Here the people of Jerusalem are being told to look for the exiles returning from the east, from Babylon. Baruch was the name of the scribe who copied down the words of the prophet Jeremiah from around 600 BC. But the book of Baruch is in what Protestants call the Apocrypha, not the Old Testament, and dates from much later than Jeremiah's time, probably about 150 BC. Yet this reading is appropriate for Epiphany, when we think about the wise men from the east bringing their riches to Baby Jesus. When the Magi came to worship in Bethlehem, they were called '**wise men from the east**'. And when they told Herod '**we have seen his star in the east**', that could equally be translated as '**we have seen his star at its rising**'.

There are real differences between the cultures of people who live in the eastern and western hemispheres. Eastern people, in general, think mystically, whilst Western people think materialistically. Oriental philosophy is concerned with states of being, whilst in the West we think in terms of laws and logic. Oriental religions provide for peasants scraping a meagre living from the soil, year after year, and think of time going round in an unending circle. Western religion is for pioneers striking out to discover new frontiers, and thinks of time as a straight line. Westerners think of Orientals as having no sense of time. Whilst Chinese and Indians pity British and North American people going round, as they put it, '**strapped to a wrist watch**'. Judaism and Christianity, although they pioneered the western idea of time as progress, are in many other respects basically eastern religions. Or they were, until St Paul and others started translating them into Greek. Yet we of the West can still learn from the people of the East.

From the translation in the King James Version, the Magi are popularly referred to as wise men, the same translation also being applied to the wise men led by Daniel in earlier Hebrew Scriptures. The phrase 'from the east' is the only information Matthew provides about the region they came from, but traditionally the view developed that they were Babylonians, or Persians, or even Jews from Yemen, as the kings of Yemen were Jewish, a view held, for example, by John Chrysostom. But the majority belief today, is they were from Babylon, which was the centre of Zoroastrianism, and that they may have retained some knowledge from the time of their Jewish leadership under Daniel. As part of their religion, Zoroastrianists paid particular attention to the stars, and gained an international reputation for astrology, which was highly regarded as a science at that time. Yet there are also legends of individual Magi having come from further East, even from Afghanistan, India or China. And maybe Rudyard Kipling was only partially right when he wrote: **East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet**, and he went on; **till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat**. And Bishop Brooke Fosse Westcott, the author of a commentary on St John's Gospel, wrote that we must wait for someone from the East, who understands John's mystical outlook, to write the really definitive commentary on this Gospel.

Today, we've largely forgotten our traditions of mystical prayer, so that many young people look to eastern religions, unaware that the best of eastern and western cultures have already met in Christianity. For example, John Main was born in 1926 and was introduced to meditation by a

Bhuddist monk whilst he was in Malaysia, and he began to integrate its practices into his own Christian prayer. Through the works of John Cassian and the Christian monastic desert tradition, John Main reconnected the importance of the tradition of contemplative prayer to modern Christianity. He went on to say: 'the meeting of East and West in the Spirit, which is one of the great features of our time, can only be fruitful if it is realised on the level of deep prayer, and this surely is also true of the union of the different Christian denominations.'

Early in the last century, Eleanor Farjeon wrote a hymn, which begins, '**People, look East**'. Her 'Carol of Advent' ends: '**People, look east and sing today: Love, the Lord, is on the way.**' We still need to keep our eyes fixed towards the east, towards Bethlehem, where the love of God came to earth as a babe in a manger. But perhaps we should also look further east, to that great world of oriental culture which the Magi brought into the Christian faith.' Diarmaid MacCulloch ends his book 'A History of Christianity' with the words: 'Even those who see the Christian story as just that – a series of stories – may find sanity in the experience of wonder, and the ability to listen and to contemplate. It would be very surprising if this religion, so youthful, yet so varied in its historical experience, had now revealed all of its secrets.'

Amen.