



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Commemoration of the Feast of the Epiphany, January 4th, 2015

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Most people – theologians, included – tend to view the Three Wise Men as exotic characters who add color to the drama of Jesus' birth, but who aren't truly essential to it. The way they're portrayed in pictures, plays and movies underlines this: They look more like extras from *Lord of the Rings* than personages from the Gospels.

But if they aren't essential to the Gospel, why do we celebrate their arrival in Bethlehem as one of the most important feasts of the Christian Year? After all, the Feast of the Epiphany, of course, marks Jesus' revelation of himself not solely to the Three "Wise Guys" – as one of our young acolytes in New York once called them – but to all mankind, Jews and gentiles.

The descent of the Holy Spirit at his baptism in Jordan was an epiphany. So, too, was youthful teaching session in the Temple; so, too, was his Transfiguration on the mountain, and so on. But Jesus' revelation of himself to the Wise Men is our primary celebration, the one foremost to our minds when we think of the Epiphany.

Some claim the reason we celebrate the Wise Men is they – like most of Christians of the Western Church – are gentiles. The Feast is an important reminder of God's grace and loving kindness to all mankind, including those who, by genes and geography, were excluded from his initial covenant with his chosen people.

There is, however, more to it than that. If it was simply a question of finding a suitable gentile to celebrate there are plenty of other candidates deserving of the accolade. For example, the

Centurion who told Jesus "Lord, I am not worthy thou shouldst come under my roof . . ." is, in many respects, an equally laudable candidate.

Even so, the Wise Men are unique. Unlike the Centurion who had met Jesus as an adult, face to face, and had heard him teach, the Wise Men were brought to Christ solely by divinely-inspired intellectual endeavor.

These men we picture as magicians were, by the standards of their times, cutting edge scientists. If they lived today they wouldn't be shuffling around in mysterious caves in silk robes and pointy hats, they would be dressed in baggy tweed jackets with leather patches at the elbows, winning Nobel Prizes and educating young skulls full of mush at Ivy League universities.

Their scientific theories might seem quaint, bizarre even, to us today, but we have the benefit of two millennia of Western Christian enlightenment behind us. They didn't. They had no special revelation of God and his purpose. They simply had their own human intellects to rely on.

They were astronomers and astrologers. That might sound a tad strange to us, but then, God had not spoken to them from the burning bush. He had not given them the Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai. They had deduced that creation was so ordered, so logical, thus there had to be an intelligence behind it. And they used the best scientific instruments devised, their brains, to explore that discovery.

Careful observation over centuries – millennia, in fact – demonstrated that the Sun and the Moon exert

immensely powerful influences on the earth. For instance, the Sun dictates climatic conditions and weather – hence times of plenty and time of famine. The Moon, in turn, governs the tides. Thus, it didn't take a great leap of logic to figure that, if the Sun and the Moon influence the physical world, they exert a similarly powerful influence on human beings. And it also seemed no less reasonable to conclude that other heavenly bodies exerted similar – though perhaps not so easily divined – influences on creation.

The Wise Men, in short, were scientists who analyzed the heavens to predict what was coming down the pike for mankind in order to manipulate their findings to forestall baleful outcomes and produce happy ones. Their goals were, thus, not so different from those of many 21st Century scientists.

Actually, in many respects they were far further ahead of lots of modern scientists, in as much as they had no doubt an intelligence, a god, is responsible for the creation of the universe. By contrast, many scientists today cling to the superstition that belief in God is somehow “unscientific.”

Yet as science writer Eric Metaxas wrote in Wall Street Journal last week: “It turns out that the rumors of God's death were premature. More amazing is that the relatively recent case for his existence comes from a surprising place – science itself.”

Metaxas pointed out that in 1966 the late astronomer Carl Sagan announced that there were two important criteria for a planet to support life: The right kind of star, and a planet the right distance from that star. Given the roughly octillion (1 followed by 24 zeros) planets in the universe, there should have been about septillion (1 followed by 21 zeros) planets capable of supporting life.

With such “spectacular” odds, “the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” was launched in the 1960s, and “scientists listened with a vast radio telescopic network for signals that resembled coded intelligence . . . But as years passed, the silence from the rest of the universe was deafening.”

The reason for the silence was that as knowledge of the universe increased, it became clear there were far more factors necessary for life than Sagan supposed. His two parameters grew to 10 and then 20 and then 50, and so the number of potentially life-supporting planets decreased accordingly.

“As factors continued to be discovered,” wrote Metaxas, “the number of possible planets hit zero,

and kept going. In other words, the odds turned against any planet in the universe supporting life, including this one. Probability said that even we shouldn't be here.

“Today there are more than 200 known parameters necessary for a planet to support life – every single one of which must be perfectly met, or the whole thing falls apart . . . The odds against life in the universe are simply astonishing!” But I digress.

Back to the Wise Men: Modern astronomers tell us an unusual conjunction of stars and planets occurred sometime between B.C. 6 and B.C. 1. To the human eye, it appeared to be an extraordinarily bright star. The Wise Men – theorizing it foretold the birth of a hugely important leader – saddled up their camels, the First Century equivalent of Humvees, and launched an expedition to test their hypothesis.

Their star led them to Judea, where, being conventional sorts of folk, they looked for the child in a place one might expect a world leader to be born – the king's palace. Then, following the directions of Herod, a man they by no means trusted, they headed off for Bethlehem, a one-horse town in the boondocks, where they came face to face with what appeared to be an unremarkable married couple who had set up house with their new born son in a converted stable.

I suspect that at this point most scientists, ancient and modern, would have thrown in the towel and headed for home to recheck their data. The remarkable thing about these three men is that they recognized the child of that unremarkable couple as the object of their quest. And they offered him the tokens of divine leadership they had brought with them – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The Wise Men understood something that many of people today fail to grasp – especially our self-anointed intellectuals. It is that God is in no way obliged to conform to human preconceptions. Their recognition of the babe in that obscure stable as the savior of the world is as great an epiphany as that granted to St. Peter when he blurted out: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus' reply to Peter applies equally to them: “Blessed art thou . . . for flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.