

Message for January 3, 2021

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

The Great Conjunction: this was most certainly the major astronomical event of last year and it attracted all sorts of attention. The Great Conjunction happens when the planets of Jupiter and Saturn appear to be so close together in the night sky that they seem to be one blazing light or star. The conjunction of the two planets usually happens every forty years or so but rarely are the two so seemingly close together to form a Great Conjunction; in fact the last time this happened was 400 years ago and that occurred during the daylight so no one could see it. The last time it happened in the night sky was 800 years ago, hence all of the interest and excitement last month. Inevitably perhaps given the rarity of the event and the fact that it first appeared on December 21st, many people referred to it as “The Christmas Star” or “The Star of Bethlehem”. Indeed many people took this one step further and speculated as to whether or not the Great Conjunction was the star referred to in today’s scripture passage. Is it possible that it was the Great Conjunction that motivated the Wise Men, or more properly speaking the Magi, to begin their long journey to see the newborn King of the Jews?

There is nothing new in such speculation; indeed Johannes Kepler, who was one of the greatest astronomers of all time, suggested this as far back as 1614. Another person who has investigated this is a well-respected British astrophysicist who works for the European Space Agency, Mark Kidger. He has written a book entitled, “The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer’s View” and in it he examines Matthew’s account of the Magi, the surviving astronomical records from 2000 years ago and what he sees in the heavens now. Based on the evidence, Kidger concludes that contrary to what the skeptics like to think something special did happen in the skies over Bethlehem so long ago.

Kidger notes that the Magi, who lived in Persia, were the scientists of the ancient world. Like most people back then they believed in astrology; that people's lives and even the future were governed by the configuration of the planets. The Magi then studied the night sky for signs and portents. Generally there was nothing particularly special to see but then, three times in six months during the year 7 BC they noticed something different; the Great Conjunction. Jupiter, which was considered to be a 'royal planet,' and Saturn seemingly came together and this took place in the constellation of Pisces which was associated with the Jewish people. This according to Kidger was very significant to the Magi. As he writes:

"Surely this meant that something important was about to happen in Judea. The fact that a royal planet was involved suggests that a royal event was imminent. A king would be born? Or would die? King Herod was an old man, hanging on to his life – perhaps the sign referred to him?"

But that was not all that happened. In the following months other natural phenomena were noticed in the night sky such as the passage of a new moon close to Jupiter. Then however the oddest but greatest phenomena of all took place. According to the Chinese records there was a huge supernova that blazed in the sky for about 70 days starting in March of 5 BC. This supernova, which is called DO Aquilae, still exists today although it can only be seen now with a very powerful telescope. According to Kidger however, it was this supernova blazing in the western sky that was the actual Star of Bethlehem. Following as it did the earlier phenomena that spoke about Judea, royalty and something special happening, the Magi were prompted to take action.

They made the long journey to Judea and naturally they headed straight to Jerusalem to see King Herod. Since Herod was not an astronomer he didn't know what they were talking about, but whatever it was he didn't like it. Herod then consulted with his own advisors who said that the Magi must be talking about the Messiah who, it was said, would be born in the city of David; Bethlehem. That was where the Magi were told to go but as they set out they noticed something else. Earlier the supernova had blazed in the western sky but now, to quote Kidger himself: "At dawn it

would have been exactly in the south, and Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem”.

This then is one of the most respected attempts using both ancient records and modern science to explain the Star of Bethlehem. Is Kidger right? Who knows? In the end it is just a theory or, as one person has said, it is educated guesswork. The important thing though isn't what the star actually was or wasn't. Rather the important thing is what it meant or symbolized and what is the symbolism of the Christmas star? That quite simply is that the Christ, the Light of the World, had come.

Christ is the light that shone in the darkness of this world. To a world that felt alienated from God because of sin and wrongdoing, Christ offered the light of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption. To a world that had lost its way in the darkness not knowing what to believe or why, Christ offered the light of his teaching and example. To a world that feared the darkness of death, Christ held out the light of eternal life. And this is what we remember on this Epiphany Sunday, that Christ is the Light of the World. Today however we also remember something else too. Jesus didn't just say “I am the light of the world”, he went on to say that “you are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” In short, we, individually and collectively are called to shine in the darkness. Indeed while we may not have realized it, this is something that many of us pledged ourselves to do during the past month.

Christmas is now over for another year and the festive decorations are being put away. One commonly seen decoration are wreaths hung in windows with a brightly glowing candle in the centre. Often too we will see candles in people's windows. Now to most people these are just Christmas decorations and nothing more but in reality they mean far more. When a candle is placed in a window the message is that anyone out in the darkness will be welcomed and be given food, shelter or whatever else they may need. A candle in a window is a very Christian symbol proclaiming that those inside, like Christ himself, are willing to be lights shining in the darkness.

Inspired by the Light of the World, we are called to be lights in the world and not just at Christmastime either. We are to let our light shine all year round because it is by letting our light shine in the darkness of the world that we offer warmth and security. It is by letting our light shine that we speak about what is right and wrong in a world often clouded by darkness. It is by letting our light shine that we even proclaim that the darkness of death is not the end, that there is indeed a life yet to come. We let our light shine in many different ways too including by worshipping and praying, by caring and sharing. Indeed letting our light shine does not necessarily mean doing anything spectacular at all.

The best way to shine is by doing our best to live the lives and be the people that God has called us to be, secure in his love and forgiveness when we are less than successful. The crucial thing is that we try, especially during these difficult challenging times as the battle against the pandemic continues. The words of a well-known and beloved gospel hymn from over one hundred years ago are just as relevant today as they were when it was first written:

Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around;
Many kinds of darkness in this world abound:
Sin and want and sorrow; so we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Jesus bids us shine, you in your small corner and I in mine. The message of this old hymn is so simple and yet so very true. It is through our shining that we proclaim the truth of the Bethlehem Star; that the true Light of the World not only came to shine two thousand years ago but still does so today in what is, in so many different ways, a dark and hurting world.