

WHAT DO THE MAGI HAVE TO TEACH US?

Exodus 6: 28 – 7: 13; Matthew 2: 1-12

I. 'Wise Men from the east' (Greek word – Magi). They were astrologers who studied the stars and their dreams for divine revelation.

A) The God we believe in spoke to them through their religion which was not the Jewish faith or Christianity.

Is there a way to God outside scriptural revelation (through dreams and astrology, for example)? This story suggests there is, and there are other such stories in the bible that suggest God can be found in many different ways outside direct scriptural revelation.

B) The Magi are faithful to God and pure in heart while the religious leaders of Israel do not hear God's voice and are corrupt in their hearts. Does God speak to the pure in heart no matter their creed or religion? Once again, the bible suggests this to be the case.

So then, does it matter what we believe? Is it enough if we are pure in heart or sincere?

C) Also, we live increasingly in a world where there are not only more people who claim no faith, but also people who claim different faiths, who are our neighbours. Do our particular beliefs and creeds as Christians matter?

II. To tackle these questions, let's begin by identifying two extremes we need to avoid:

A) The extreme of fundamentalism is a problem in any religious tradition. A fundamentalist believes that unless you believe as they believe, you are damned to hell. There is one truth and they have it. Unless you recite specific words and believe specific things as they formulate them, you are lost. Unless you experience certain things the way they experience them, you are deficient and your connection to the divine is inadequate.

But is it possible that there may be those of another religion who have a connection to God that is serious and profound and therefore valid, even if we cannot understand it? At the very least, a person of another faith who worships regularly in community, prays, listens and meditates on their sacred texts, who is committed to kindness, compassion, honesty, integrity, and forgiveness, is closer

to me than someone who claims to be a Christian but has little commitment within a community of faith and little commitment in living out their faith. Actions and practices matter, especially when they come with sincerity and humility. Actions and practices of genuine, attentive, committed love can only come out of the inspiration of God.

B) But does this lead to the other extreme of relativism – and by relativism I mean the belief that every faith leads to the same goal and worships the same God? If we accept that other religions can communicate God like Christianity does, do we end up with relativism?

No.

The Magi come to pay tribute to a specific God, not any God. A relationship with a specific God is key, as is a specific tradition and specific spiritual practices and rituals of worship and prayer which help us access and commune with such a God. The specific God Jesus reveals and embodies makes all the difference. But this doesn't mean this God may not be encountered in other ways also. God is bigger than our creeds, our beliefs, our traditions and our way of understanding, experiencing and worshipping the divine. The key is the content of God's character we believe in and how that shapes our values as people of faith. Who is the God we believe in, and how is this specific God connected with our beliefs, traditions, values and commitments? How is the God Jesus reveals the foundation of our beliefs, values, traditions and commitments?

III. This also means that what we believe about God, about the world, about people, about our purpose in the universe, matters. As Christians it is increasingly important that we know what it is we believe and the reasons why. To have a real relationship of respect with a person of another faith who takes their beliefs seriously, I need to be able to articulate or define my own beliefs. What are they?

My Creed – Christian faith stripped down to its essence...

1. I believe that I am created by God, full of goodness and beauty, infinitely so.
2. I believe that in spite of the goodness and beauty in me, I also make mistakes in my behavior and carry imperfections in my heart toward others, toward myself, toward life, toward the earth and toward God.
3. I believe that I am forgiven and loved by God, in spite of my mistakes and imperfections, infinitely so.

4. I believe that I must learn how to forgive and love others, myself, life, this earth and God the way I am forgiven and loved, infinitely so.

5. I believe this God is revealed and embodied most fully in Jesus, in his life and death, that he is resurrected, and that his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, lives in me and is working to inspire in me the faith, hope and love I need to live justly, serve compassionately and give generously of myself with all my mistakes and imperfections.

6. I believe Jesus the risen Christ can most fully inspire in me such faith, hope and love when I am being nurtured with others in Christian community, not just through my own individual spiritual practices.

IV) People of other faith communities are our friends not our enemies, especially as they exemplify some elements of our creed in the way they live. Our real enemy is indifference, selfishness, lack of commitment, lack of compassion, judgementalism and a lack of openness to other ways of seeing and believing.

Fundamentalism of any kind is wrong because it makes no room for others and the perspective of others. It judges others and condemns them if they don't believe and express their beliefs according to a specific doctrinal and spiritual formula.

Relativism is wrong because it refuses to make a commitment to a specific tradition of accessing and communing with the divine. Compassion requires openness to difference, yes. But the God we worship revealed and embodied in Jesus, demands that we commit ourselves in love, that we defend and protect the vulnerable, that we forgive offenders even though we also hold them accountable, that we recognize that the truth of Jesus Christ is bigger and richer than any one creed can contain, and yet without a creed we have no anchor or foundation.

May we discover who are our true friends, and may we find creative ways in love, to be kind and make friends where possible even with those who think of themselves as enemies. May the God of resurrection truly bring us through whatever cross may come into our lives and may we open ourselves to find fellow spiritual friends on our journey as Joseph and Mary found the Magi on their journey.... Amen.