

"AND WISE MEN CAME TO BETHLEHEM"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist  
Church, New York, New York  
January 9, 1983

INTRODUCTION

A story is told about two men sitting next to each other in an airplane some 30,000 feet above the earth. One man was an astronomer, the other a theologian. After a while each began to share his understanding of the other's discipline. The astronomer said, "I believe that so much religion can be summed up in the phrase, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so'". And the theologian, somewhat miffed at this simplistic understanding of his scholarly discipline, said, "Yes...and all astronomy can be summed up with the phrase, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.'"

DEVELOPMENT

The gap between religion and science is enormous. They haven't talked together very much, really, for about 200 years. Today, as a result, they don't understand one another's language. The distance between them is great, and it's quite unfortunate.

The problem today is not only ignorance, it's also arrogance. Each side so often claiming that it has the whole truth; science claiming that religion can't be true because it doesn't fit into the categories of science, and religion claiming that much of science can't be true because what it says can't be found or substantiated in the Bible. That's pure arrogance. Bad science and also bad religion.

The truth of the matter is that science and religion are two different approaches to the same reality. Reality, I feel, is really big enough for both of them. It really is. Science uncovers a dimension of reality that religion does not have the tools to discover. And religion sees a dimension of reality that science is blind to. It doesn't have the eyes to see.

That's simply the fact of the matter. They are two different approaches to the world in which we live - to reality - and only arrogance would lead anybody to say that "my way of seeing it is the only truth". It would be like a fisherman saying that the only fish in the sea are those that he has caught in his net.

But I'm happy to point out that in recent years humility has come to both sides and conversations have begun. This is what has happened. The best religion has come to see that science has not rid the world of God, but traces the footprints of God in creation. The best science has come to see that "the greater the island of our knowledge, the longer is the shoreline of mystery". In other words, science doesn't rid the world of mystery. Science increases our perception of mystery in the world. This has happened in science especially in recent generations. And as a result, something else has begun to happen. Wise men once again are beginning to take the journey to Bethlehem.

SCIENCE LED THEM

This is the First Sunday in Epiphany. Epiphany is the time in the church year when we celebrate the visitation of the first Wise Men to Bethlehem 2,000 years ago to worship the Christ Child. And today I want to address contemporary wise men and share some thoughts with you about those first Wise men.

The first thing I want you to notice is that their science led them to worship the Christ Child at Bethlehem's manger. They did not abandon their way of understanding the world in order to get to Bethlehem. They came the way they were use to journeying - through their intellect and their reasoning. They didn't have to become something else in order to worship Christ; it was their science that led them there.

It's not important that their science was different from the science we know today. It was the highest learning of their day. That's what Matthew wants us to see. Matthew was very careful to point out that the Wise Men were from the East, that is to say, from Persia - which is like saying that they were from the center of the highest and most respected learning of that day. It was as if he had said they were Wise Men come from Oxford, or from Harvard, or from MIT - something like that. This is to say that they came representing the best, the most respected learning of their day...and in following the best they knew and understood, they found Christ.

We have a different science today, one that makes that First Century science look like superstition. But the history of science is the history of finding new images, or models, called paradigms - ways of looking at the world. In two thousand years we have used several of them: Ptolemy, Copernicus, and now Einstein. Someday, no doubt, science will discover another image through which they will understand the world, and they will look back on the 20th century and think how quaint Einstein's picture of our world was. Finding a new paradigm doesn't mean that the old one is wrong; it simply means that the new one discovers a new angle, a new way of looking at reality.

In those days the best science was astrology. So the point is not that astrology led them to Christ in Bethlehem, the point is that wise men in any age following the best they know, are led to wonder....and there to worship.

#### A GROUP OF WISE MEN TODAY

At Stanford University there is a group of wise men who are searching for quarks. These wise men are theoretical physicists and they are working on Stanford's linear accelerator. The linear accelerator is the world's largest microscope; it's a tunnel two miles long with a big building at the end of it. It's the world's largest microscope allowing the physicist to look at the smallest thing in the world - the atom. For thousands of years scientists said atoms are the basic building blocks of matter. There was nothing beyond the atom, they said. The word atom itself means indivisible. But then only a hundred years or so ago an electron was found inside the atom. Then neutrons and protons, and all of a sudden the atom, instead of being the basic form of all matter was discovered to have a whole universe inside itself, with a nucleus with planets orbiting it erratically. It's amazing.

We all know about that and about the splitting of the atom in 1945, and the energy it released. What we may not know is that since 1945 physicists have been exploring the universe inside the atom the same way astronomers have been exploring the universe in the heavens. Only instead of using a giant telescope they are using a giant microscope, and they have discovered that the universe inside the atom is every bit as wonderful and mysterious as the universe in the heavens. Just as astronomers keep finding new planets and stars in the heavens, so physicists keep searching for new particles in the atom. They call them quarks and other exotic names.

Now all this searching the universe inside the atom by wise men is very esoteric and arcane. I've told you everything I know about it. It's only barely comprehensible to us simple shepherds. What I want to point out to you is that the language these physicists use to describe their search of the universe inside the atom is the language that the ancient Wise Men used. It's the language of religion.

Sidney Drell, the Director of the linear accelerator at Stanford, said: "We are listening for the music of the spheres, for the harmony of the universe". When I came across that statement I thought that doesn't sound like a scientist. That sounds like a wise man. Just as the ancient Wise Men in their day searched the universe for the music of the spheres, for the harmony of the universe and found it in Him who Paul in his letter to the colossians described as "the first born of all creation, through whom all things were created, both visible and invisible, and in whom all things hold together". If someone had asked those ancient Wise Men what they were looking for, they perhaps might have said, "We are looking for the music of the spheres, for the harmony of the universe". And following the path of their science, the best they knew, they found it. They ended up in worship, "hearing the music of the spheres, the choirs of angels", singing, "Glory to God in the highest."

In another interview Sidney Drell said that "Physicists are in search of the Holy Grail in the faith that there is some elegant, simple, beautiful pattern to the universe. It's a form of religion, you might say". That's wise men talk!

And in still another context he says, "The modern physicists are moving close to the point of the view of the Bible". Then he quotes Paul again, this time the Letter to the Hebrews, the passage which says,

"Through faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear."

That's an amazing statement on the part of a nuclear physicist. What it is saying, I believe, is that if followed faithfully....science is a path that leads to worship, to the place where science and religion converge - if left alone, if left to follow its own path. Science and religion are two ways of looking at the same reality. They are like shepherds and Wise Men, each coming by their own path. Two different ways of seeing the world from two different perspectives. If left to the best that they know they both will end up in wonder and in worship, for all of God's truth, we are aware, is one!

So what I want to say to you this morning is that I believe that God leads wise men to Bethlehem just as sure as He leads shepherds. And He did that not only in some event 2,000 years ago, but He does this today in the time in which we live.

#### SCIENCE AND RELIGION TODAY

And that means that you don't have to check your brains when you come in through the front door of the Church. I'm concerned about that and I want to underscore it because there has been a resurgence of an interpretation of Christianity in our time that seems to want to renew the war between science and religion. A Christianity that reads the Bible literally and selectively, and sometimes superstitiously, and defines Christianity in terms of some infallible set of doctrines, doctrines formed intentionally, incidentally, some 75 to 100 years ago for the purpose of separating Christians from those who were being instructed by the new science. That kind of Christianity has retreated into a fortress castle and has raised the mote, and is suspicious of anything that is modern. That's the kind of Christianity that is experiencing a resurgence in our time. I believe it is against the spirit of Christ, and against the tradition of the Church for 2,000 years, which tradition began by recording that Wise Men from the East came to worship Christ, and they came by their own way.

So, if you are one whose personal creed is honesty, intellectual integrity, and skepticism toward all closed, neat and tidy systems, then you are not excluded

from faith. On the contrary, you have the prerequisites for genuine and vital faith. I believe that instead of being made to feel uncomfortable for not conforming to some dogma or doctrine, you ought to be encouraged to "go your own way". Nor do I believe that science or the unrestricted search for knowledge are threats to belief in God. I believe they are authentic means of finding and glorifying God. And I believe that the great affirmation in the Bible is that God created this world, and He created human life to have dominion and power over it. And that Jesus came into this world to provide us with a model, a paradigm, if you will of what it means to live in this world, and how we can use the power that God has given us to build and create a better world for all his many children.

And I sometimes fear that those who exercise that power in our time, the "Wise Men" of our day will conclude that there is "no room" for them anymore at Bethlehem, that they will look inside the door of the Church and will hear people talking as if the 2,000 years of intellectual and scientific discoveries in this world had not taken place. They will look at the Church and see a religion that is not a living, dynamic power trying to shape a better world, but a religion focussing either on the world of personal problems of private lives, or debating with energy the answers to questions that people no longer are asking.

Instead of seeing Christ as someone who's coming "on a cloud to put an end to the world", we should see Him as "present with us now...in His Spirit, guiding and directing those who still follow Him today into building a new world, a world where technology is used to eradicate disease and hunger, a world where reason is used to order life in such a way that its fullness promised in the creation will come to all peoples of the earth, a world where the great power that God has entrusted into the hands of human beings will be used to create life and not destroy life. And it will be Wise Men who will do that, those who have the power to make lasting decisions that will determine the quality of life in the 21st Century. They are the stewards over the power of creation.

And that's why I believe that now - more than ever - God is leading Wise Men seeking the secret of the universe to Bethlehem and Christ. I believe the end of their long journey will be to find Him, "Through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together", as Paul put it.

CLOSING Let me close this sermon with an anecdote taken from the lives of Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, the two giant physicists of the 20th Century. One day they were visiting Kronberg Castle and Niels Bohr said, "Isn't it strange how this castle changes? As soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here, suddenly the walls and ramparts speak a different language. Once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different place."

Somebody else commenting on that incident said, "Something like that happens to human history when we remember that Jesus Christ lived here." The cosmos consists of matter and energy. People continue to act with mixed motives as they have always done. Yet when we remember that Christ lived here and walked on this planet, the walls and ramparts have a different language. I believe that's what happens whenever wise men of any age finally find Him. We see there a grace that transforms the way we see our world and the way we live our lives!

PRAYER Open our minds, O God, to the thoughts of Thee and of thy purpose for us. Grant that we may never settle down in the familiar and the comfortable, so that we are not ready to 'rise up' and follow the stars that lead us on and on. Help us in our life here on earth to start out on the great adventure of finding a way of life with our fellow men and women as we have been taught by the great teacher of life, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.