

Epiphany

5th January 2024

'Astrology and the Magi'

Is 60: "Nations come to your light" Ps 71: "Before Him all kings shall fall prostrate"
Eph 3: "pagans now share the same inheritance"
Mt 2: Magi . . . gifts of gold, frankincense & myrrh.

There was a TV programme on, a while ago, entitled, "Secrets of the Universe: Great Scientists In Their Own Words." It had footage of significant scientists from the great sweep of the 20th c., including Albert Einstein, themselves explaining their great breakthroughs. What was nice for me was that there were some 1950s film clips of the founder of my research group, Martin Ryle. I did four years of research in astronomy in the [Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory](#) (part of the Cavendish Laboratory) in the late 80s, by which time the founder was no longer alive, but his legacy lived on in many researchers still then active. I do hope to go, later this month, to a celebration of the Cavendish Lab., as it moves this year to a brand new building after 50 yrs in its present, rather-dated, 1970s one.

Studying astronomy for those years, as I did, I always had to be ready for the frequent mistake that people made: "Oh, you're studying astrology, are you?" I was

always quick to correct them — no, *not astrology, astronomy!* Not the silly horoscopes and meaningless star-signs, but the real stars and galaxies themselves, fascinating and beautiful objects in the universe! As Christians we are *forbidden* from putting any faith at all in horoscopes and in astrology! "The stars" do not affect our lives, destinies, fates, in any way that astrology claims, and we should be very clear about warning others against consulting horoscopes. Some may say, "Oh it's just a bit of harmless fun," but the occasional few might actually believe the made-up drivel that's written in magazine, newspaper and internet horoscopes, and base their life decisions on such astrology. Those who are vulnerable do do that — I know they do: understandably they'll grasp at anything they think will help them make sense of life, even that which is pagan or superstitious like astrology. *We* must put no faith in that, but only in God.

However ... What about the Star of Bethlehem? What about the Magi? What about the faith that *they* clearly put in the motion of a particular heavenly

phenomenon? Isn't that what we hear of today, for the feast of the Epiphany, the miraculous discovery of the Christ-child by these exotic, star-gazing foreigners? Well, yes, in a way, it is. Back 2000 yrs ago, astronomy and astrology were not so distinct. Those who were learned and had leisure, as these rich Magi seem to have been ("Magi" just means "wise men" ... they weren't necessarily *kings* as our carols often suggest) would have had time and facilities to watch the night sky. They would have had the astronomical skills to have done the relevant calculations, and been fascinated with the day-to-day, night-to-night trajectory of stars and planets and would have spotted highly unusual things happening in the sky.

Now, we can't know exactly what was the event known as the 'Star of Bethlehem.' Lots of books and speculations are written on the subject, by all sorts of writers, Christian and otherwise, trying to narrow down the options. It never ceases to fascinate. Only in the past week, I read a recent CTS pamphlet, [*The Star of Bethlehem*](#), written by another priest who's also an

astronomer. He evaluates a number of hypotheses — comets, novae or supernovae, planetary conjunctions — and combines that with other data including evidence from Roman-coin designs of that period, issued in the Syria–Judaea province, commemorating some sort of a 'star.' There certainly seems to have been, for example, a curious and very rare conjunction / occultation of 3 planets in the immediate vicinity of the moon, in the constellation of Aries, in April 6BC ... whatever it was, it somehow stirred the Magi to set out on an epic journey to search for a newborn king in Israel. Now, isn't this *astrology*? Isn't this exactly the sort of thing we are forbidden from doing, putting our trust for life decisions in merely natural phenomena like the motion of planets? Well, yes, it is actually. But let's not forget that the Magi weren't Jews. Jews have no interest in astrology, or 'fate' derived from the stars. No, the Magi were pagans, possibly Zoroastrians from what is modern-day Iran; they'd not (yet) come into contact with the true faith or the living God. So, honestly, it's not beyond God, is it, or wrong of Him, to use the

attraction of an unusual heavenly sight to draw the attention of these foreign intellectuals to events in Israel, the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem? God can use whatever He wishes, setting in motion in the heavens a device of His own Creation, an occurrence to draw men and women into His Truth. Though they may have spotted planets' motion which made them convinced that something awesome was about to take place, what the Magi would come to see was that it's not some impersonal cosmic energy that governs the universe, but *the Father of Our Lord Jesus*. God the Creator hid in the heavens a conundrum for them to spot, and so they found a baby king, but they also found true faith, they found the one Son of God, the creator of all things. No longer need they look to the night sky, they could look to heaven itself, the heaven of the Father, Son and Spirit, and find a truth way beyond their imagining.

As Christians, then, we do not need to search high and low, in shadows, guesses and obscurity, for the truth about life. We do not — in fact, we *must not* — put our

faith in astrology, nor in new-age or occult phenomena, mediums, clairvoyants, crystals, Reiki, Buddhist or Hindu philosophies like yoga, or other pagan practices. (Cf [Catechism n. 2116](#).)¹ These are dangerous and can only lead us away from the living God. We aren't in the dark like the Magi were before God led them by the light of His 'Star' — we have all we need in Jesus, the true Light. We need no other fancy pagan substitute or exotic extra. *Jesus is all that we need* — His Person and His Gospel — and the Magi show us this. All that they had in their eastern mysticism was as nothing compared with the real source of life, Jesus Christ. We do not need to 'rediscover' such pagan things, and don't let anyone ever try and convince you that you do! The Lord has given us everything that we need for a blessed life on earth, here in the Church, and all

¹ **2116** All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honour, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.

that we need to attain heaven. The Epiphany message is that all the world can, and should, come to God in the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ:

Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him.