

Weekly Musing † January 2, 2011

Byzantine icon 16th century

We now leave the Christmas season, or at least we do on Thursday, which is twelfth night. Now comes the feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. Epiphany is a fixed Holy Day like Christmas and unlike Easter. One could say a good deal about the Three Kings or the Wise Men, however it would be largely conjecture, even as to their number, three, which was arbitrarily assigned to them because scripture mentions three gifts. I have included pictures from various medieval cathedrals (mostly) of carvings of the Wise Men. The last one is of the three Wise Men sleeping and an angel appearing to them.



Saint Genou, France



Chauvigny, France



Autun Sommeil, France



Tarragona, Spain



Castelnau, France



Elymais coin

We have no idea where the Wise Men actually came from. Many have traditionally thought they came from Elymais, one of the countries left after the break up of the huge Persian Empire. Here is a coin from Elymais with one of their kings.

Last year a scholar named Brent Landau published a book on the story of the three wise men that he found in a Syriac manuscript in the Vatican Library. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Christ and the lingua franca of the Persian empire. The document dates from about 175 – 225 A.D. Although the document does not tell whence they came, the author surmises India or China. The document is what we call one of the apocryphal writings and further one of the gnostic writings (secret or hidden meaning only available to the elect and often dualistic in character). Christ is presented as a divine entity in the form of a star that gives wisdom to the wise men. Like most of the apocryphal and gnostic writings of this early period, the symbolism of the text was usually of more importance than the empirical veracity.

The enormous Cologne Cathedral in Germany houses the supposed relics of the three wise men. One might quip that whoever bought these relics in antiquity perhaps paid too much. Nonetheless, there they are in a splendid golden reliquary in this magnificent towering cathedral which is the most visited site in Germany. The cathedral, though dating from the middle ages, wasn't finished until the 19th century at a cost of one billion dollars in today's money. Below is the reliquary.



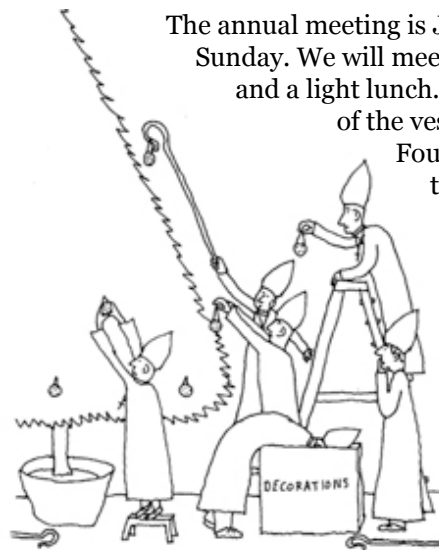
Cologne Cathedral, Germany

Whatever the truth is about the three wise men, they represent something about the early church that sometimes appears to be in danger of being extinguished. That is, of course, the exaltation of wisdom, a learned notion of wisdom, not the sort some claim they got from the “school of hard knocks.” It was not piety or good works but the wisdom of the stars that brought the three kings to the stable of the Christ Child. The greatest church in Christendom was called Hagia Sophia (Constantinople). That means “Holy Wisdom” and was synonymous with Christ himself.

News from St. Luke's



CHURCH MEETINGS ARE BRILLIANT



The annual meeting is January 22nd which is Sunday. We will meet after the 10 am service and a light lunch. We will elect members of the vestry, the Memorial Foundation and delegates to diocesan convention (which I believe is in Helena this year). Please come. I never allow these to go long but they are important for the life of the parish. By our bylaws we have to have 35 people to conduct business.

The Youth Group meets this Wednesday for the annual burning of the greens. This is much more fun than the “hanging of the greens.” Now we only burn a wreath or two but I used to burn all of them outside on the playground. In years past the flames were more than a little high. Often we write down the things from the previous year we want gone and burn them along with the wreaths.

This coming Sunday is the last for Dr. Laura Rathe as she leaves for a new job in Minnesota. We will miss her, Leah and Jimmy. We will honor her in church with a gift. She has been instrumental in our choir and youth group, both of which are ministries that take a good deal of time on a regular basis.

The Rev. Canon Gary Waddingham • Rector, St. Luke's Episcopal Church • Regional Canon, Diocese of Montana