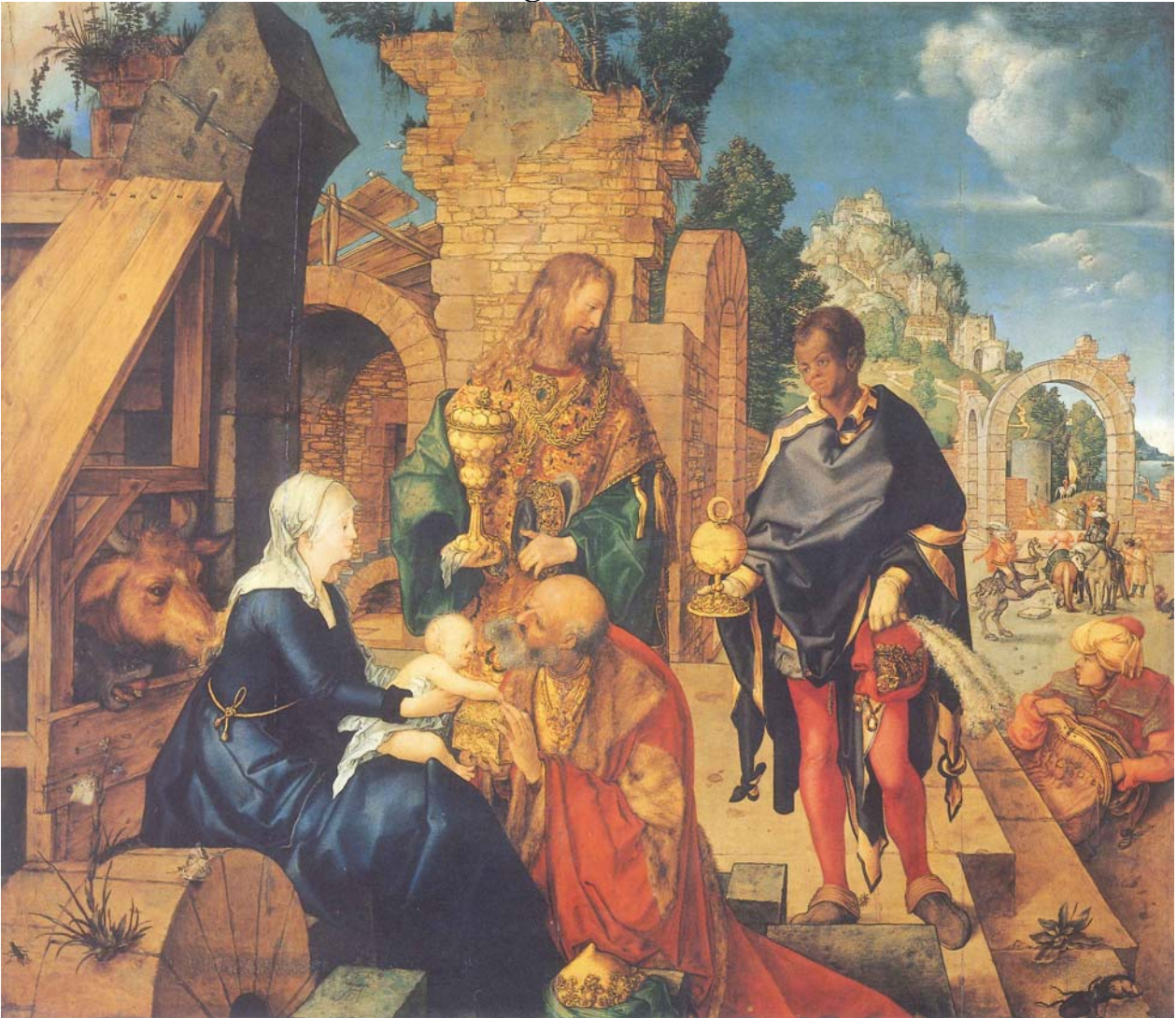




24 January 2010
The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Choral Evensong
1 Samuel 8 vv. 1–18
Matthew 2 vv. 1–12

Images of Christ



Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528): The Adoration of the Magi
By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor

“And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”
(1 Samuel 8 v. 18)

The exercise of political power throughout history has been fraught with injustice and tragedy and violence, with the poor and the innocent not infrequently the victims of the rich and the powerful - whether that power be exercised by emperors, monarchs, religious authorities or, even modern democracies. Furthermore societies tend to imbue their own political systems and leadership with sacred authority turning political projects into sacred causes: from the Holy Roman Empire through to the ‘war on terror’.

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Our Old Testament reading provides us with a poignant example of regime change, a moment of transition from one political system – dominated by religious authority – Samuel the Prophet-Judge to another. In his political swansong, Samuel doing his best to deflate the allure of strong monarchical leadership, does not mince his words about the nature of kings as harbingers of a world marked by heightened inequality and exploitationⁱ.

But of course it is not as simple as all that for however much Samuel might disapprove of monarchy, the old system resting on religious authority had fallen into disrepute; had lost all credibility. A situation that has many echoes across time and space not least in the criticisms levelled at the Pope, the Catholic Church and the sale of indulgences by the Reformers in the sixteenth century which set in motion a train of events with profound implications for the shape of Europe's religious and political landscape.

Well, clearly my choice of image for the beginning of this sermon series has been dictated by the season. It being Epiphanytide: that time in the Church's year for reflection upon the incarnation and especially the ways in which Christ's glory, his divine nature, is made public; is revealed to the world, most evidently in the story of the wise men bearing gifts and paying homage to the Christ-child.

Yet as my opening remarks hint, there is a much darker and more conflict-ridden side to the happy scene. For Matthew's account is fraught with the tension between earthly and divine sources of power, and its fallout: Of course, there is the gift of myrrh symbolising death and foreshadowing the crucifixion, but the coming of the Magi casts a much more direct shadow with the blood of the innocent children slaughtered by the threatened and despotic monarch, King Herod. But it should come as no real surprise that the biblical account of the Magi bearing their symbolic gifts in worship before the infant Christ has also provided a backdrop for conversations and arguments around political power; who has it, and how it might be wielded; and, of course, the role that religion might play in legitimating the exercise of such power.

I would like to suggest then that Albrecht's Dürer *Adoration of the Magi* of 1504 commissioned by local royal, Frederick the Wiseⁱⁱ, for his Castle chapel of Wittenberg might be approached as a significant contribution to that ongoing conversation about power. A highly accomplished work of significant originality, it is not however the most important of Dürer's many legacies to the history of art: In contrast to a series of woodcuts of the Revelation of St John the Divine issued in 1498 which established his reputation. These dramatic images show off Dürer's extraordinary combination of technical skill and imaginative intensity at a moment of widespread disquiet and unease before the turning of the half-millennium when such prophecies had captured the popular imagination. Of course the Adoration of the Magi as a Church commission for a royal patron (albeit an intelligent and sympathetic soul) is a sign that Dürer has arrived. But by contrast with the freedom available to him in his illustrations of the book of *Revelation*, it requires him to work within more prescribed iconographic boundaries.

Perhaps the most obvious of these lies with the depiction of the three kings: Although the scriptural account refers to the Magi, frequently identified as a Persian priestly caste of astrologers, a tradition of interpretation evolved fairly quickly turning these religious figures into representative sovereigns. The first evidence we have for such a development comes from the theologian, Tertullianⁱⁱⁱ, in the early third century, but by the sixth century, not only do we have three kings (a natural development from the text) but the legend has developed such that we both know their names - Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior and that one is young, one middle-aged and one elderly. All of these features can be seen in a mosaic in Ravenna dating from the late sixth century^{iv}.

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By Dürer's time however a number of other conventions had developed: It is for example the oldest king who is depicted in the act of homage to the Christ-child offering gold, the symbol of sovereignty. The principle of representativeness has also been extended – it is not simply that all humanity is symbolised by the three ages of man, but also that in the place of three Persian figures, (those on the church in Ravenna could be from the same family), there is now an attempt to represent the races. So rather than affirmation of the Christian message from the mysterious East, all the known world is now gathered at the crib before the Christ-child.

The Adoration of the Magi was one of the most frequently commissioned of the nativity scenes in the Medieval world and it is easy to see why, in terms of all those involved: It accords easily with popular piety suggesting that whatever the actual political reality may be, all people should rightly give their allegiance to the Christian God; and it conjures the possibility of a fundamental human equality - that monarchs are like peasants, both must bend the knee before the most gentle of rulers. It is also of course attractive for the artist, who can indulge himself in various ways: For some^v it allows loving attention to a retinue of exotic provenance with camels and a wonderful array of headgear. For Dürer, it allows him to demonstrate his mastery of perspective, his acquaintance with the Italian Renaissance and perhaps more personally his love of landscape and his deep attachment to, and mastery of, the detail of natural form. The painting before you is then littered with small beautifully executed examples which reinforce the meaning of the whole through their symbolic references – the stag beetle in the right hand corner for example, a somewhat obscure reference to the figure of Christ though one well known in Dürer's day^{vi}. Similarly the plaintain behind it, known for its healing properties recalls the blood of Christ spilt to redeem the sinner and, more obviously, the butterflies to the left - an ancient and very natural symbolic representation of the soul and resurrection.

Refocusing on the whole, the guiding conventions for such commissions must of course suit the powers-that-be and here a delicate balance is being struck. It is, clearly no accident that custom dictated the key interaction to be between venerable human political authority (the old king) and the Christ-child and that it is clearly focused through the symbol of sovereignty – gold. One obvious way of reading this is to see in the mutual gaze not so much a gift as an exchange. The Catholic Church, identified with the Christ receives the allegiance, loyalty and support of the Christian monarch: the loyal king receives in return the legitimation of his political power.

But, this is 1504, a pregnant, apprehensive moment in European history, and moves are clearly afoot that will end in disrupting that delicate balance. Dürer is deeply in sympathy with the emerging humanist commentary most noticeably of Erasmus. He is also imbued with what might be described as a Renaissance spirituality with its regard for the beauty of the human form, the genius of the individual and for developments in human knowledge. It is the first of these that has perhaps the greatest impact on the painting: Most obviously in his portrayal of the very Germanic-looking Madonna and the Christ-child, their full human portrayal, a powerful incarnational emphasis rendering them resistant to becoming ciphers of ecclesiastical power.



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Just as striking is how easily the eye is drawn away from the proper focus on the venerable king and the infant to the other two kings: In earlier paintings the kings are often in effect clothes props for artistic embellishment, but here again we have two real people: The central figure looks remarkably like the very striking Dürer himself, of which we have a host of portraits, and then there is the representative of Africa – the Moor. What significance can we attribute to the former's attentive gaze and to the introspection of the latter – bearing in mind that this picture was painted around a decade after the Fall of Granada^{vii} and the end of Moorish sovereignty in Spain as a result of Catholic aggression, and in the decade that the mass trafficking of African slaves to the New World began? Is this really a straightforward representation of the triumph of Christendom as the Moor comes in homage to Mother Church or is it a questioning, even a subversion; an assertion of universalism that all are made in the image and likeness of God - which finds its poignant echo in the rallying cry of the Abolitionists three centuries later: 'Am I not a man and a brother?'

And what of Dürer, if self-portrait it be, occupying the centre ground looking towards his brother king: is this an example of hubris, the artistic genius asserting himself against the authority of the Church? Or is it a more personal homage, sceptical of the old order and the collusions of power, and more representative of the devout and solid citizens who are beginning to find in the work of Erasmus and latter in Luther a formulation of Christian faith that places the reality of the Christ-Child more clearly to the fore set against the backdrop of ruins which depict the pretensions of imperial powers throughout the ages.

In the end, whatever the cultural trappings and layers of meaning (or indeed my speculations), Dürer's incarnational emphasis cannot but tell a story that continues to radically challenge and subvert the power and legitimacy of all manifestations of human sovereignty, ancient or modern, which must ultimately come before the King of Kings who sees fit to manifest that power in '*putting down the mighty from their seat*' and exalting '*the humble and meek*^{viii}'.

ⁱ Only a few pages on we find that even the good King Solomon the Wise in possession of great wealth and 700 wives and 300 concubines: Samuel may have been sugaring the pill a little about the people's daughters simply serving the king as confectioners or cooks or bakers.

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_III,_Elector_of_Saxony.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tertullian (ca. 160 – ca. 220 A.D.) a prolific early Christian Berber and the first to write Christian Latin literature identified them as kings on the strength of Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:6.

^{iv} The mosaic in the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna can be seen at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_\(1\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magi_(1).jpg)

^v E.g. Andrea Mantegna, 1462.

^{vi} The Septuagint version of the bible renders *Habbakuk* 2:1 as: *For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beetle out of the timber shall answer it*. The meaning of the text is disputed with other versions replacing beetle with 'plaster'. Saint Ambrose (c. 300) compared the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to Habakkuk's beetle five different times. Saints Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria also make this association.

^{vii} 1492.

^{viii} From the Magnificat: *Luke* 1: 46-55.

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