

The wise men from the East

Meditation on the Christmas card of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS)

A mystical story

The story of the "wise men from the East" (Matthew 2:1-12) is one of the most mystical stories in the New Testament. No sooner was Jesus born than three Magi from the East appeared in Jerusalem to worship the newborn King of the Jews. The inevitable consequence of their actions was to place the legitimacy of Herod the Great, the ruling king, in question. Herod attempted to use scholars to locate and do away with the newborn king of the Jews. However, the three wise men from the East were not to be duped. They found the child, fell down, worshipped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then they returned undetected to their country. Many questions remain unanswered. Who were they? Where did they come from? Why do we never hear of them again in the Bible?

A story about power on Earth

This church window is in the Andong Church of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) in Seoul, South Korea. The South Korean artist Kim Hil-Gong who designed the window places the biblical story in a Korean context. The three wise men wear headdresses that identify them as members of the Korean upper class: an officer, a king and a court official bow down before Jesus Christ.

The theological message of this window is quite clear: Jesus Christ is more powerful than worldly rulers. This was true at the time of Herod when the three wise men knelt before the newborn Christ. From the very beginning, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh have been interpreted as symbols of secular power, spiritual power and the healing power of Christ.

Jesus Christ is more powerful than all worldly rulers! In 1980 when the window was created, this message was a burning issue at the time. In May 1980, mass demonstrations began in South Korea against the ruling military dictatorship. Their response was a brutal crackdown. In the fight for democracy and the rule of law, Christians in South Korea played a central role. They joined forces with the resistance against a regime that was as cruel as Herod's at the time of Jesus.

The churches' commitment to freedom and peace with North Korea was instrumental in breaking the power of the military dictatorship. As a result, the churches in South Korea experienced strong growth and they were regarded as credible, courageous and ready to stand up for the good of others. Even today, South Koreans still view the Christmas blessing of "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men" as a sign of hope for peace and reunification with the people in the north of the divided country. For their part, the three wise men make it very clear: in the end, the power of Christ is stronger than any worldly power.

A story for the whole world

This stained-glass window helps Christians in Korea find a place of their own in the Christmas story. If we accept Kim Hil-Gong's interpretation, the three "wise men from the East" came

from much further east than previously assumed. They did not come from Persia or Mesopotamia but from the “Far East”. The wise men's journey to the newborn Jesus has always been interpreted as a portentous sign of people embarking on a pilgrimage to the risen Christ. Just as at the end of the story when people from all corners of the globe are drawn to Holy Jerusalem to worship Jesus Christ, so here at the beginning of Jesus' life, representatives of all people fall down on their knees before the manger. The wise men from the Orient pray to Jesus - on behalf of all people of the Earth. What happened in Bethlehem is not a story just for Jews or Christians. The Christmas message is meant for all people. They all find their place in front of the manger.

A story for me

When I see a church window like this, I always ask myself, “Where am I in this picture?” Personally, I believe the three wise men from the Far East are inviting me to join them. They appear to be floating through the window. From above, they are already illuminated by a red beam of light, the sign of the Holy Spirit and from them the light is spreading out all over the Earth. The three wise men also arouse my curiosity: what are they looking at? What do they see? And where do I find my own special place in front of the manger?

Reverend Dr Dieter Heidtmann, General Secretary