

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

So this last week has seen the aftermath of the failed attempt by a radical Islamist to blow up a plane on the approach to Detroit airport. And this last day or two has seen an attempt by a radical Islamist to assassinate Kurt Westergaard, the Danish cartoonist whose cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad sparked an international row.

It makes you ask the question, where are the seeds of fear planted that make our world such an uncomfortable place 2010 years into the Christian Era?

While radical Islam is now a global force, it is true to say that in our present history its roots are most clearly perceived in the Middle East – and in particular in the area around Iraq and Iran. I remember recently flying over this region and looking down from 35,000 feet onto vast expanses of sand and scrubland, with long trails leading through from township to township – and wondering "why is it that this terrain here is so inimical, so frightening to the western mind and soul."

There is a sense, of course, in which this has always been the case. And especially so in the biblical record. For Israel, the East meant this Iraq/Iran area – and think of how it is thought of! This is the direction from which most of Israel's conquerors approached, including Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. East of Judea is the Tigris and the Euphrates. East of Judea is the Garden of Eden. East of Judea is Ur of the Chaldees. East of Judea is Babylon, where Jews lived in Exile after the destruction of the first Temple. East of Judea is the Jewish community who stayed behind when Jews returned to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem...

The East is "foreign" – strange and threatening. Israel may well be occupied by the all-might Empire of Rome – but at least you could understand these Romans. From the East came a mixture of the unknown and the stuff that folk legend is made of. And that was very frightening.

When Matthew, then, introduces Wise Men who come from the East – they bring with them all the mystery, magic, lost wisdom, frightening history – all designed to shock and perturb his audience. What is going on in this story? It is almost a political statement to these very same Roman masters. "You can strut about up and down our roads with your banners and your clanking swords, but there is a greater force than you. Greater because it is in the soul and the imagination. And this mysterious force is coming to pay homage to Jesus!"

You can see then why those rather comical figures we push into our Nativity Plays – in our own case here an engaging mixture of children and grown ups in their fine costumes – actually are both scary and political in the original story of the birth of Jesus. These are high ranking political and religious figures from the kingdoms of Midian and Persia who have come to challenge – in a sense – the very power of Rome itself, by pointing towards a baby!

So why did these strangers make this journey. It was dangerous – no doubt about that – and perhaps one of the surprising things is the total innocence that appears to surround their idea that they could plod in Jerusalem with camels and ask old Herod what he thought about the whole idea. Anyway, it seems clear that they were motivated by a sense of the unexpected here – there was something so compelling that it drew them from Persian lands afar to bring worship and generous gifts. This is a story that at one level shocks. What is happening to

the world if men who can afford to give away gold, frankincense and myrrh chose to enter into middens of stables and bow down to little children.

The shocking thing is that this epiphany story is a story of God's grace and mercy that if for all.

As with most aspects of the Christian liturgical calendar, this season of Epiphany has theological significance as a teaching tool in the church. These Wise Men were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as "King" and so were the first to "show" or "reveal" Jesus to a wider world as the incarnate Christ. This act of worship by the Magi, which corresponded to Simeon's blessing that this child Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32), was one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of all races, and that the work of God in the world would not be limited to only a few.

And this part of the story is so important that it is handed over to some very strange people who would stand out like a sore thumb in Judea. Because, you see, this is about the compass of God's unstoppable grace. This gives us a foresight of what is to come, because this Christ child who attracted odd Magi to his cradle will later have the same magnetic effect on Samaritans, prostitutes, horrible and corrupt tax collectors, Roman soldiers, and lepers). Matthew knows what his readers know – the words of ancient scripture – and so he turns to the prophet Isaiah. The wealth of the nations is coming to you, bringing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

This story tells us that a newborn baby, can terrify the arrogant, and bring them down in the end. We learn that God's reach of grace goes far beyond every obstacle within or without, and pushes us beyond them, too. We learn that a great light has dawned, a light that draws all people and calls us to live our lives illuminated by its truth.

This has been the Year of Homecoming in Scotland – and many have made their own journeys back to these shores to reconnect with their roots and to say something about national identity in our world. It has been entertaining, and given a lot of folk a really good holiday we hope. It reminded us in many ways of the great Scottish Diaspora. The centuries in which Scots were forced to go overseas by the landlords of the Clearances, or encouraged to go overseas to take their technical, financial or managerial skills to the lands of the Empire.

In any event, we have always lived in a society here which is quite well wired-in to the world at a distance. But when we have a vision of a Homecoming it has been rather of our sons and daughters returning to their ain fireside! This great Homecoming represented in the story of the Epiphany and of these wise men is quite different. In this case those who come are truly strangers, foreigners – probably not really welcome at all.

The challenge for us is to imagine that we may be them. Exotic and strange though they are – can we recognise ourselves in them? Because that is the teaching of the story.

Do we think we are insiders? Or can we see that in God's good grace we are all "homecomers" together? In all the celebrations of Christmas and the season of Epiphany, a time of the manifestation of God's glory in a little child, have you been "overwhelmed with joy" at any time? Stylised and routine as this time of celebration is – can we still find that place within us that is capable of being overwhelmed by joy? Can we hear that God is still year after year, in Christmas and Epiphany and indeed in every season, calling us to this joy, this remembering, this new vision?