

Plato and the Wise Men

In or around the year 428 BC, one of the most brilliant minds ever to grace this earth was born in Athens, Greece. His name was Plato. It is fair to say that his philosophical teachings became the most influential strand in the history of western thought. His thought dominated the philosophical scene for centuries. So influential was he on western thinking that even St. Augustine adopted his insights and incorporated them into what would become western Christianity; a heritage that shaped Martin Luther and continues to shape us today. At the heart of Plato's teaching is a common sense recognition of the variety of things that pass in parade before our view. We encounter a world through our 5 senses, and these sensory experiences come in all shapes and sizes, forms and colors. To make sense of the many things we see, Plato taught the mind must discover reasons for the way these physical things behave and operate and fit together. This pursuit led him to proffer a world behind the visible world, a world of Ideas or Forms. According to Plato, these Forms are the true eternal patterns and all physical objects that we see are but mere copies. For example, a beautiful flower is a copy of the eternal Form of beauty. A good person is a copy of the eternal Form of goodness. Therefore, we move from the beauty of a singular object, which is always subjective and based on individualistic experience, to contemplate the real Idea of beauty, which is objective, universal and eternal. Only by contemplating the objective Idea of truth or goodness or beauty, which lie behind the world of perception, can a person reach understanding and true knowledge. As long as a person dwells upon the copied world, the eternal world of Ideas will lay just out of reach.

In order to teach this rather difficult lesson, Plato used the famous *Allegory of the Cave*. The story goes like this: Imagine a deep dark cave where three people are being held prisoner chained to the rocks, as it were. These three captives have been there since birth and so they know nothing else except the blank wall they are forced to stare at day after day. Behind the prisoners there is a roaring fire, which causes various shadows to be cast upon the wall. As the people above pass by, their shapes are outlined on the

wall in front of the three captives. To the prisoners, then, these shadowy figures are the whole of their reality. Then one day one of the prisoners manages to escape and upon leaving the cave discovers all that he thought was real was in fact an illusion. Of course, it takes time for the prisoner to adjust to the natural light and to real objects. There is a great learning curve, which accompanies his freedom. Having for so long believed in the blurred world of shadows, it takes time for his eyes to adjust, for his senses to be heightened, and for him to get used to the real world of light. Of course, delighted to be free of his faulty thinking, he desires to grow in true knowledge, as well as return to the cave and free the others from their deception. But what he discovers when he returns is that the other prisoners don't want to be released. They prefer the lie to the truth, the darkness to the light, the shadows to reality, and so they threaten to kill the man if he ever returns again with his flighty theories. And so from this comes the doctrine of two competing worlds: the dark world of the Cave and the real world of Light.

Considering his widespread influence, it is no stretch to assume the wise men we meet in our narrative were influenced by Platonic thought. For these wise men were, after all, sages and scholars and would have been familiar with the predominant themes of philosophy. St. John the Evangelist and St. Paul both show a working knowledge of Platonism in their respective biblical books, so it stands to reason that these wise men knew of the same. The joy is to put ourselves in the narrative, so to speak, to take their places and try to think as they thought. Here are three intellectuals, who have devoted their whole life to untying the Gordian knot of existence, to pursuing true knowledge of the world behind the world, the Idea behind thought. And then, as if from heaven itself, they are given a sign in the celestial realms, which indicates the arrival of something new. A natal star predicting a regal birth. Perhaps this child would be the one to fulfill the destined role so long ago described in Plato's *Republic*- a new Philosopher King. And yet, what they encounter is so much more than they could have ever imagined. In Christ, they met not the Philosopher King of Plato, but the King of Kings: God Himself. They met not the one who could

lead them to true knowledge, they met Knowledge Himself: the Way, the Truth and the Life embodied in the flesh. For Plato was indeed onto something. He rightly predicted there is another world. A world that lies hidden behind our everyday experience. A world just beyond the pale of earthly existence. And these wise men discovered this other world in the person of Jesus.

Upon meeting the Christ Child, these wise men bowed in worship before Him. For that is the only response worthy of such an occasion. It is our response too. We bow before our King and confess Christ to be the great Liberator of humanity. For to complete the comparison this evening, it is we who live in the Cave; it is we who dwell in the shadows, and had it not been for Christ, we would have been perfectly content to go on doing so. But Christ entered the Cave. Christ broke into our shadowy cosmos. Christ is the light, who shines in the darkness of our sinful ignorance. He came to break the chains that bind and lead us out of death to life. And we hated Him for it. We preferred the lie, the darkness, the shadows. We sought to kill him for His efforts. We succeeded in this our morbid mission. And the darkness of the grave matched the darkness of the Cave. But death could not hold Him, and darkness flees in the presence of light. Christ ransacked the darkness and He beckoned us to follow in His wake. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this isn't the real world. This is the land of illusions. This world is but a sad copy of the eternal world, which dwells in the eternal mind of God Himself. For now, we see in a mirror darkly, but soon we will see God face to face. Very soon, we will awaken from our slumber and our eyes will behold the resplendent glory of God's presence to dwell with Him in a new world, a real world, a world without end. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy Mills