

The Visit of the Magi 9th January 2022

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-11, Matthew 2:1-18

Intro – the popular story

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, though strictly speaking that was on 6th January. Epiphany means to appear, like the dawning of a new day, or to reveal. With the visit of the Magi or Wise Men we think particularly of the revelation of the Messiah, Jesus, to representatives of the Gentile nations of the world.

It is a story we are very familiar with but which has been embroidered a bit over the years. Were there three of them? Maybe. Were they kings? Probably not. Were their names Casper, Melchior and Balthasar? Almost certainly not! Today we are going to try to keep closer to the biblical script!

It is also a story that seems to round off the Christmas saga. It's very easy to read about the Magi returning to their own country and metaphorically write 'The End' over Christmas. We take down our Christmas decorations, move into Ordinary Time and wait for Lent - without giving much thought as to how the visit of the Magi should impact our lives for the next 300 plus days of the year.

So this morning I would like us to take a fresh look at the story, to try to hear the message that Matthew wants us to hear and to explore what it means for us today. But before we do that, let's pray.

Prayer

Father, may these spoken words of mine be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, once the babe in Bethlehem, now the King of glory, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The Magi as part of the big-picture

Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy – not the most exciting reading for us and we might be tempted to skim read it, but for Matthew and his readers it sets the story of Jesus in its context. This list of ancestors emphasises the continuity with what has gone before and assures us that Jesus' birth is all part of God's overarching plan for his creation; his plan to put right all the wrongs that came into the world when humanity chose to go its own way and not God's; we looked at that, didn't we, in our studies in Genesis. Matthew goes on to tell us that Jesus is the Messiah, (1:17); the one who will save his people from their sins, (v21) and that he will be Immanuel - God with us. (v23).

We will come back to these themes later but now the big-picture story takes an important step forward with the arrival of the Magi, travellers from a far country. Our canvas gets a lot bigger as we see Jesus revealed to the Gentiles, not just the Jews, but the nations of the world. Two thousand years on I'm not sure we can imagine what a revolutionary idea that was. The Jewish nation at that time was very protective of its identity and what it saw as its unique relationship with its God. Yet God's heart for all the peoples of the world had always been there in the OT – God had promised to bless the nations through Abraham, and in Isaiah we heard how the nations would come to worship Israel's God. Simeon had prophesied that the infant Jesus would be: "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your

people Israel.” (Luke 2:32). And with the coming of the Magi we see that beginning to happen. Jesus’ coming is good news for the whole world and, as we shall see, Matthew’s Gospel ends with the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

The Magi

But, who were these Magi? The term is of Persian origin so they were probably from the Babylon/Mesopotamia area, present day Iran and Iraq. They were magicians, astrologers, interpreters of dreams and portents, and keen observers of the stars. They believed that significant events on earth would be reflected in what they saw in the heavens so an unusual occurrence in the stars signified some important event on earth.

We don’t know for sure what it was that caught their attention but ‘the star’ would have to have appeared before the death of Herod in 4BC. The most likely event was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC which is noted in the Babylonian records three times in that year: 29th May (its rising); 3rd October; and 4th December. Because Jupiter is the royal planet and Saturn was often associated with the Jews, the two together led the Magi to conclude that a new King of the Jews had been born. And they made the decision to go and pay him homage. God spoke to them and drew them to himself in a language they could understand and respond to.

Although they were not kings they must have been men of wealth to bring with them such costly gifts as frankincense and myrrh as well as gold. Both of these are resins produced from trees that grow in a small area of the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. The trees are tapped two or three times a year – a bit like rubber trees – and the hardened gum is then sold. Frankincense is extremely expensive – in the time of Jesus it was more valuable than gold.

But even embarking on such a journey would have involved considerable expense. They had to travel about 800 miles which would take at least 40 days, and probably more. By the time they arrived in Bethlehem the family had moved into a house and Jesus is now a young infant not a new-born baby.

The Gifts and Their Significance

Let’s think a bit more about their gifts.

Gifts can tell us a lot about people. Our grandchildren are all in the UK so we send money over rather than presents and when we phone them up over Christmas we find out what ‘we’ have given them. This year one of them had some model plane kits because that’s what he’s into. And, apparently, we gave the oldest grandson a shaver – which told us that he is really growing up fast! In the same way the gifts the Magi presented to Jesus were special and significant too.

The first thing to note is that they were expensive gifts – the sort of things you would offer to a king. Matthew’s readers, soaked in the Hebrew Scriptures, would have remembered the description of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon when she arrived with “a very great caravan – with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones.” (2Chron 9:1). They would have sung the words of Psalm 72 – “May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him with gifts. May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.” (Ps 72:10-11). They would

have recalled the prophecies of Isaiah 60: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ... All from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.” (Isa 60 : 3-8).

The visit of the Magi with their gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh were pretty obvious signs that Israel’s long awaited king had finally come. The Messiah is here! It is the beginning of a new era.

The Messianic King

So, in the Gospels we see the King in his kingdom as Jesus takes authority over the wind and the waves; over sickness and demons; as he feeds the hungry and teaches the people with authority. There was a wave of anticipation and expectation but ... it was followed by disappointment. Do you remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel.” You can hear the disappointment in their voices, can’t you? Jesus has to explain to them that the Messiah had to suffer and die and then enter his glory.

And Jesus has entered into that glory. Steven, the first martyr, sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. John in Revelation has a vision of the risen and ascended Jesus reigning in glory. Indeed the whole message of Revelation is to encourage the persecuted Christians by showing them Christ is King, despite what is happening in their earthly lives. For they, and we, all have to live in the now and not-yet of Jesus’ kingly reign.. The Messiah has ushered in an everlasting kingdom that will continue into the age to come but it has not yet come in all its fullness.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in vv16-18 where we read about the response of Herod to the birth of Jesus. King Herod cannot brook any challenge to his kingship. He has already eliminated numerous rivals including his wife and sons, so he has no qualms about giving orders that all baby boys in Bethlehem under two years old should be killed. Now Bethlehem was a small town so this probably amounted to no more that 20 or 30 babies but it’s not about numbers, is it? Each mother grieves - “refusing to be comforted because they are no more.”

This tragic end to the story mirrors what life is really like. Jesus is Lord but until his return tragedies still happen, we do not all see happy endings in this life. Herod to me is a terrible example of what happens when humanity refuses to acknowledge God as king. We saw examples of this in our studies in Genesis, didn’t we? This need to be in charge, to cling on to our power at all costs; to put our own wants and desires above the well-being of others. We can see this operating today at all levels of society: from people trafficking to domestic abuse; from on-going fighting and wars to family disagreements; and how much can the effects of global warming be put down to powerful vested interests or our reluctance to alter our consumer-driven lifestyles?

What is our response to this?

Like Jesus’ first followers we too have to come to the recognition that Jesus was a different sort of Messiah with a different sort of kingdom. The Lion of Judah is the Lamb who was slain. His kingdom is established not by the power of the sword but through a sacrificial death on a cross; not through the love of power but through the power of love.

This was not the way of the world back then, nor now, but I would suggest that when we see people living in sacrificial ways, putting others first, as has been seen among health workers in places like the UK during the Covid pandemic, we are seeing the unseen influence that the message of Christ has had on our society. But back to our story.

The One who saves his people from their sins

For Mary and Joseph the visit of the Magi and their gifts would probably have been one more confirmation that Mary's child was special. They brought gifts fit for a king - but which have implications beyond kingship. You see, gold, frankincense and myrrh were all important elements in temple worship, and the Temple was the place where ritual sacrifices were offered to remove sin and restore the relationship between God and his people. But now Joseph has been told that Jesus is the one who will save his people from their sins and certainly this is how Christ's death is seen in the rest of the NT.

Hebrews 9:26-28²⁶ [Christ] has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Colossians 1:13-14¹³ [Christ] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This is our faith; this is the good news that we can rejoice in, and share with others.

Immanuel

But the Temple in Jerusalem was not just a religious building, the place to go for healing, forgiveness and the renewal of the people's relationship with their God, it was also the place on earth that He had chosen as his dwelling place, the place where God dwelt among his people. The coming of Jesus changes all this. As we read the story of the Magi we have to carry into it what we have already been told about this child – that he is Immanuel God with us. Just as Jesus has become the one sacrifice for sins, so he has become God with us.

John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

And we have His promise that he will be with us always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:20)

The Magi came to worship the one who was born King of the Jews but as we have seen the story of the Magi is more than a story to be told at Christmas time. It contains truths that form the bedrock of our faith. It certainly reveals Jesus as the

Messianic king, but there are also indications of his priestly and sacrificial role as the one who will save his people from their sins and be ever with us as our Immanuel.

Our response

But how might we respond to what we have heard today.

Hopefully not like Herod who resisted the kingship of the Messiah. Nor like the scribes in Jerusalem who seem to have been indifferent to the implications of the visit of the Magi – maybe they were afraid of Herod or just wanted to maintain an undemanding status quo. But hopefully we will be like the Magi – alert to what God was saying,; committed to following through no matter what the cost, those who joyfully fall down and worship.

Our Commission

But Matthew doesn't leave it there. Matthew and the other gospel writers are not just reminiscing and telling stories about Jesus to give us some good moral teaching or an example to follow, they are choosing to tell us stories that proclaim the good news that in Jesus God is establishing his kingdom, and that we have a part to play in that.

Tom Wright says:

“Those who are put right with God through the cross are to be putting-right people for the world.” In other words, we not only pray: “Come Lord Jesus,” we work to address the evils of the world and to bring the light of Christ and the rule of Christ into the dark places of the world.

And if we look at the end of Matthew we can see a verse that bookends the whole Gospel. We began with God's revelation of his Son to the Magi as representing the Gentile world and in Matthew 28 we have our marching orders, as it were to that same world.

Matthew 28:18-20 ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Tom Wright says: The Church “is a world-wide community that exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.”

Now there are gentle steady fires as well as the more spectacular wild fires, But if a fire is no longer burning, it is no longer a fire.

May we be guided and empowered by the fire of the Spirit in our life as a church community on mission.

Our Challenge

I want to leave with you this challenge.

- How are we as a Church community going to do this in 2022?

- What could it look like for us to have an outward focus, to be a missional church?
- How am I and I ask this of myself as well, going to reach out to my Jerusalem; Judea and Samaria; or indeed, the ends of the earth?
- How am I going to bring light into dark places?

Let us spend some moments in silence as we ask ourselves:
What is God saying to me?
What am I going to do about it?