Through the eyes of the magi

Christmas worship 2022 – Sermon Notes

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Date preached: December 25th 2022

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1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." 9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

- 1 예수님은 해롯왕 때 유대 베들레헴에서 태어나셨다. 그때 동병에서 박사들이 예루실렘에 찾아와서 2 "유대인의 왕으로 태어나신 분이 어디 계십니까? 우리는 동병에서 그분의 별을 보고 그분에게 경배드라러 왔습니다" 하고 말하였다. 3 해롯왕은 그 말을 듣고 몹시 근심하였으며 온 예루실렘도 이 소문으로 떠들썩하였다. 4 해롯왕은 대제사장들과 율법화자들을 다 모아 놓고 "그리스도가 어디서 난다고 하였소?" 하고 물었다. 5 그러자 그들이 이렇게 대답하였다. "유대 베들레헴입니다. 그것은 예언서에 이와 같이 쓰여 있기 때문입니다. 6 '유대 땅에 있는 베들레헴아, 너는 결코 유대에서 제일 작은 미율이 아니다. 너에게서 한 지도자가 나와 내 백성 이스리엘의 목자가 될 것이다.'" 7 그 때 해롯은 박사들을 몰래 불러 별이 나타난 때를 자세히 캐묻고 8 그들을 베들레헴으로 보내며 "가서 이기에 대하여 자세히 일어보고 찾게는 내게도 일려 주시오. 그러면 나도 가서 이기에게 경제하겠소" 하였다.
- 9 박사들이 왕의 말을 듣고 떠나가는데 동방에서 본 그 별이 다시 나타나 그들보다 앞서 가다가 아기가 있는 곳에 멈췄다. 10 그 별을 보고 박사들은 기뻐서 어쩔 줄 몰랐다.
- 11 그들은 그 집에 들어가 아기가 그의 어머니 미리아와 함께 있는 것을 보고 엎드려 아기에게 경배한 후 보물함을 열어 황금과 유향과 몰약을 선물로 드렸다. 12 그러고서 박사들은 꿈에 헤롯에게 가지 말라는 하나님의 자사를 받고 딴 길로 자기 나리에 돌아갔다.

Introduction

Let me begin our worship by wishing you and your families a very joyful Christmas season. However you choose to mark this day I hope you have a wonderful time. For some believers

Christmas and the festivities that surround it are troubling. So often in our world the secular has trampled upon the sacred. We ought to be remembering the arrival on earth of our saviour. Instead all we hear about is Santa and Rudolph. For too many people Christmas is just about materialism. So it's quite right that as Christians we condemn the rampant commercialism surrounding Christmas. Greed and excess should have no place in the life of a believer. It's also true that some of the parties and celebrations that take place around Christmas can get out of hand. We must never ourselves participate in, or encourage others to engage in sinful and wicked behaviour.

Some look beyond these things and find the whole idea of celebrating Christmas controversial. They argue that Christmas was originally a pagan holiday, and that Christians have simply hijacked the day and made their own. Therefore we should not join the pagan world in celebrating.

How could, or should we counter these arguments? Is it okay to celebrate Christmas, or should we avoid doing so? The bible is actually quite clear on the issue. Ultimately it comes down to a matter of conscience. Let me read to you the words of the Apostle Paul;

6 He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. (Romans 14:6-7)

What Paul is telling us here is that our decision to observe, or not observe special days is a matter for our consciences. If we would like to observe Christmas or any other special day and doing so does not trouble, or prick our conscience then we can do so. Naturally we should conduct ourselves in a way that is not sinful and that honours God. Equally, if we are troubled, or feel it is wrong to celebrate we are free not to observe Christmas. Either way, and this is very important, we are not to judge those who may choose to do something different to us.

Personally, I will mark the season in a modest way by remembering the amazing circumstances of our Lord's arrival on earth. Every year I read the accounts given to us in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Even though I know the stories well I am always moved and enthralled. What a truly wonderful story it is. In some ways it's a shame to only talk about it at Christmas.

Over the past few years at Christmas we have looked at some of the people and places involved in our saviours arrival on earth. Last year we focused on the town of Bethlehem. Before that we considered the experiences of Joseph and Mary. Today we turn to look at the magi, the wise men who travelled such a long way to see the Messiah. Before we look at today's passage of scripture let us pray.

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

As you are probably aware only two of the gospels tell us about the birth of Jesus. Mark and John begin their accounts at the beginning of Jesus public ministry when He was about 30 years of age.

So to find out about how our Lord and saviour came into this world we need to turn to Matthew and Luke. Today we will be looking at Matthew's account. In truth, Matthew does not tell us a great deal about the actual birth. There is no mention of Mary and Joseph having trouble finding a place to stay. No talk of the infant being laid in an animal's feeding trough. And no mention of angels or shepherds. Matthew just gives us the basic facts before moving on to tell us about this significant event following the Messiah's arrival. It is this event that is the subject of our investigation today. I am of course talking about the arrival and worshipping of the infant Jesus by these mysterious men from the east.

Matthew begins by telling us that these events took place some time after Jesus birth. Jesus we know was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Matthew emphasises this point because there was another Bethlehem in Galilee. He emphasises this point because the Old Testament prophesied that this is where the Messiah would be born (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem in Judea was the ancestral home of David, the great king of Israel.

We also are told that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. As you know there are 6 different Herod's mentioned in the bible. This particular Herod is Herod the Great, the first of the Herods. He is referred to as being "great" because he was responsible for a large number of great and spectacular building projects. Herod was the Roman-appointed king of Judaea from 37 to 4 BC. You may at this point be a little puzzled. Today we refer to the time since the birth of Jesus as being *Anno Domini* (AD). This Latin term simply means in the year of our Lord. Time then is measured from Jesus birth which we declare as year zero. So I am preaching this sermon 2022 years since the birth of the Lord Jesus. Or am I ? Probably not, we now suspect that the early reckoning of Jesus birth were a little inaccurate. It is therefore most likely that Jesus was actually born between 6 and 4 BC.

Next we are told that some "wise men" came from the east. Who and what were these wise men? Since the bible does not tell us much about them history has filled in the blanks. During the Middle

Ages a legend developed that these men were kings. They numbered three and that their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. It's an interesting story but not one founded on any real evidence. How many wise men came? Eastern tradition sets the number of Magi at 12. Most people think there were three. After all three gifts were given. The bible however never gives an actual number. Three seems an unlikely number.

These were important men, travel in the ancient world was dangerous and they were carnying a precious cargo. It seems likely that they would have been accompanied by some servants and soldiers to protect them.

Depending on which bible translation you are using you will see these men described as either "wise men" or as the "magi." Magi derives from the Greek word *magoi*. In Greek it refers to "one of a learned and priestly class." The Persian word used to describe these men is *magush* which means "magician." They were in fact ancient scientists or scholars. No doubt they were skilled in medicine, philosophy and natural sciences. More importantly they were experts regarding the stars. Today we refer to such people as astrologers.

As to where exactly in the east these men came from again we cannot be sure. Probably they came from Babylon, which for centuries had been a centre for the study of the stars. This means they made a journey of around 900 miles or 1448 km to find the infant Christ.

Interestingly Babylon had also been the home of Daniel. We are told in the book of Daniel (Dan 2:48) that he was put in charge of all the wise men. Daniel had also written about when the Messiah would come (Dan. 9:24-27).

Did these magi and those who followed in their tradition learn from Daniel? It seems highly likely.

Traditionally we think that the shepherds and the magi turned up just after the birth of Jesus. This is how it often appears on Christmas cards or in children's picture books for example. This is not what happened. An early tradition has the magi arriving on the 6^{th} of January. Again this is probably not accurate. Although it is difficult to be precise the wise men's visit may have been any time between one and two years after Jesus's birth. I will explain why this is the case as we go on.

The magi come to Jerusalem. After all they were expecting to find a king. Kings generally speaking are born in palaces in the capital city. Let us read on.

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2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

When the magi arrive in Jerusalem they are eager to find the object of their journey. They ask the people they encounter for directions. Where is the King of the Jews? The first thing I want you to note here is how the magi frame their question. They ask where is He who has <u>been born</u> King of the Jews. Not, where is He who will later <u>become King</u> of the Jews. Usually male royal babies are born as princes. It is only later that they become kings. Not so the Lord Jesus He was born a King.

The Magi tell the people that a star is what alerted them to the birth of this king. We do not know what brilliant celestial body they saw. Over the centuries there have been many suggestions. Some say it was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Others believe it was a supernova (a star that explodes and emits unusual light for several weeks or months). Some have suggest a meteor or a comet similar to Halley's comet. We cannot tell what star the Magi saw, but we should remember that it was their profession to watch the heavens. Certainly some heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world.

The magi had come to worship this king. The word worship here is the Greek *proskuneo*. It might mean to "worship" as we understand the word but more broadly it means to pay homage or respect to one mightier than you. The magi clearly expected that the Jews would be excited about the arrival of this king (the Messiah). They are about to find out that this isn't the case. Let's read on.

3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

King Herod is not happy to hear this news. Herod was constantly on guard against threats to his rule, especially from his own family. He was a deeply suspicious man. During his reign he assassinated many family members whom he suspected of disloyalty. So his being troubled is completely in character. He knew that the Jewish people's desire was to overthrow the Romans and take back their country. He also knew that a Jewish rebellion led by their king (messiah) would provoke an extreme Roman reaction and his position of power was in jeopardy.

We are also told that the general populace of Jerusalem was also troubled. The people were troubled because they knew Herod to be a cruel and brutal man. What steps would he take to find and eliminate this child. They were rightfully fearful about what he might do. Herod first of all calls together his own wise and learned men; the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

He wanted to know from them what they knew about the birth of the messiah. In particular, he wants to know where this messiah was prophesied to be born. The prophets of old had spoken of this. Let's see what they say.

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

The chief priests and the scribes answer Herod by quoting from Micah chapter five verse two. The prophet Micah received his prophetic insight around 700 years before the birth of Jesus. They also add to this prophecy the fact that this ruler will shepherd the people of Israel. This is an allusion to what was said about David in 2^{nd} Samuel 5:2. This verse reads;

Also, in time past, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and brought them in; and the LORD said to you, 'You shall shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over Israel.' "(2 Samuel 5:2)

So these men demonstrate that they understand two important truths. Firstly that they understand that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Secondly that He would be a Ruler who would shepherd God's people Israel. These men knew what to look out for, all the evidence was available to them. The sad thing is as we have seen in our study of Mark's gospel that these men were not really interested in meeting the Messiah for themselves. Let us continue.

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7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Herod was a wily and crafty man. He summoned the magi secretly to come and meet him so as to avoid arousing the interest of the Jewish religious leaders. The last thing he wanted was the people getting aroused and passionate about the arrival of the Messiah. He wanted to determine from the Magi when the star first appeared. This would give him some indication of the age of this child. Although we are not given their answer we can make certain assumptions from Herod's actions. Later the wicked Herod commanded that all boys aged two and younger be killed in the area. Therefore we can assume that the wise men first saw the star a year or so previously (on the night Jesus was born). It had taken them some time to prepare for the trip and the journey itself had taken a long time. So Jesus would have been between one and two years of age at this time.

Herod tells them to go and find the child and then inform him of the child's whereabouts. His hypocritical humility must have fooled the magi. Presumably they thought he did genuinely want to go and worship this new king. As foreigners, they perhaps did not know about Herod's wicked and cruel nature. This is borne out in the fact that Herod did not deem it necessary to send an armed escort with them to monitor what they did. He clearly thought these wise men would report back to him when they had found Jesus. Let us read on.

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

After departing from Herod the magi again see the guiding star. Does this mean they travelled at night, or was the star so bright it could be seen during the day, we are not told? Whatever the case they are able to follow it to the place where the Lord Jesus is located.

Matthew also includes the wonderful detail about how the magi felt at again seeing this guiding light. They were filled with great joy. After a long and tiring journey they had almost reached their destination. Let us see what happens next.

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11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The star led them we are told to a house. This again is supportive evidence that this was some considerable time after the birth. In Luke's account we are told that there was a shortage of places to stay. Mary and Joseph did not have a house and Jesus was born in a place that typically housed animals. This may have been a stable or cave or the downstairs section of a residence. We are also told here that the magi saw the young child with Mary. I direct your attention here to Matthew's description of Jesus. He uses the Greek word *paidion* meaning young child rather than *brephos* meaning infant or baby. This further supports the idea that some time has passed since Jesus birth.

We are then told that they fell to their knees and worshipped Jesus. What an amazing event this must have been for Mary and Joseph. A group of strange foreigners turn up and begin to worship your child. Following this they opened their treasures and presented gifts to the Lord Jesus. It was common in the ancient East that when you appeared before royalty, or a person of considerable importance that you would bring them a gift. The same holds true today. I recently read a book about the British Royal family. Wherever they go around the world they are always being presented with extravagant gifts.

The magi had travelled a long way to pay homage to the king. It is not surprising that they had brought some lavish gifts with them. The gifts, as every child who has ever attended Sunday school will tell you were **gold**, **frankincense**, **and myrrh**. Since the earliest of times people have wondered about these gifts and ascribed meaning to them. What presents would you give to a royal baby? We should remember that these wise men had carefully selected these gifts and travelled a long way to present them. Let us consider each in turn.

Gold

Gold is the most precious metal that exists. It has therefore always been highly valued and desired. Crowns and other important items were always made out of gold. The Hebrews too regarded gold as being special. The Ark of the Covenant was overlaid with pure gold. Gold then is a suitable, or appropriate gift for a king.

Frankincense

Both frankincense and myrrh were aromatic gum resins derived from trees and bushes and imported from the east. Frankincense is produced by scraping the bark of certain native species of trees and then harvesting the beads of resin after they have dried. When burned as incense, it creates a strong and beautiful aroma. So here is the key detail. Frankincense was used as part of the worship in the temple. Frankincense then is the gift for a priest. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for men. This is exactly what Jesus did for us.

Myrrh

Myrrh is a fragrant spice derived from the sap of a tree native to the Near East. Like frankincense, it can be burnt and used as incense. But in the ancient world it also had wider usage as a perfume or as an anointing oil. However most notable with regard to Jesus' life is that myrrh was a key ingredient in the mixture of spices that were used to prepare bodies for burial. Jesus of course came into the world to die.

So let me summarise what we see here. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for one who was to die.

So these were the gifts the wise men presented to Jesus. Even as a small infant he was rightly acknowledged as being King, priest and saviour of mankind. Let's conclude today's passage with verse 12.

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12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

It had been the intention of the wise men to go back and report to Herod what they had found. However God intervenes. They are told in a dream to not go back to Herod. They therefore leave and take another route back to their home in the east.

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Things to think about

I have two comments to make on today's passage.

1 The long journey to Christ

The journey of the magi was a long and difficult one. Many days spent either sitting on a camel or walking. Uncomfortable nights sleeping on the ground. It would have been easy to have given up and turned around. But this was not what they did they persevered in their quest to find the Lord Jesus. In many ways their journey mirrors our own lives. We have a long way to go in our Christian journey. There are ups and down. Seasons when things are difficult. Times when God seems far away. But just like the magi we are to persevere. We are not to allow anything to come between us and our journey to Christ. May we stay strong and resolute in the year to come.

2 Listen and obey

We know that the magi were intelligent men. The bible after all calls them "the wise men," not the "about average intelligence men." What signals these men out for such an honour is that they

listened out for and then obeyed God. Perhaps there was some degree of danger in not going back to report to Herod. No doubt he would have been very angry to have been tricked. But these men listened to what God told them and then obeyed God. This is a good lesson for us to learn. There are many things that we might compromise on. There are things we might do that might make our lives easier but that are not pleasing to God. Let us ask for God's strength to resist and seek to listen to and obey God.

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