

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 26 December 2021

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The Wise Men

Matt 2:1-12

We're all familiar with the Twelve Days of Christmas, a song heard often in December in the run up to Christmas Day. Many think the twelve days end on Christmas Day when, in fact, 25th December is only the first day of Christmas!

The twelfth day brings us up to the eve of Epiphany, 6th January, when traditionally the Wise Men visited Jesus.

I hate to be a spoil sport, but almost every Nativity play and Christmas card is wrong! They show the shepherds and Wise Men visiting the Christ Child at the same time. In reality, the Wise Men showed up a long time afterwards as much as two years later.

Their arrival in Bethlehem to view the Holy Child is known as the Epiphany, God's revelation to the Gentiles. It is quite astonishing that Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, should begin with Christ being revealed to the Gentiles, and end with the commission to make disciples of all the Gentile nations.

So just who were these Gentile Wise Men and why is their visit so significant?

We don't know much because all the information we have is contained in these few verses from Matthew. We know they came from the East, probably Persia, and travelled quite a distance to get to their destination.

What caused them to undertake such a vast journey, almost a thousand miles, over a long period of time, at least 4 - 5 months, and at great expense?

These Wise Men were Magi, most probably court officials, employed by kings to advise them using such means as magic and astrology. Similar to the magicians we find with Pharaoh in Egypt who opposed Moses and Aaron.

Astrology and magic arts are not practices that Christians ought to be dabbling in, so why did God use such men as these to reveal his glory? We don't know, but it does mean that God is not limited by our understanding and can choose the most unorthodox ways to make known his truth.

These Wise Men noticed an unusual star in the eastern sky and concluded that a new king had been born to the Jews.

How could these men from miles away geographically and worlds apart culturally, come to that conclusion? How did they know anything about the Jews?

Remember, 600 years before Christ the Jews were exiled from their homeland to Babylon. When Cyrus the Persian became ruler he allowed the Jews to return; some did but many remained.

So Jews were widespread and their Holy Scriptures were well known, including the prophecy from Balaam:-

'I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a sceptre will rise out of Israel.' (Num 24:17)

On seeing the star and realising its significance, they start the long, arduous, expensive journey to pay homage to this king, probably sent forth by the Persian monarch.

Their first stop, Jerusalem, is no surprise as this was the capital city, and where else would one expect a new king to be born? It was a surprise to Herod however, and the people of Jerusalem. They were unaware of the heavenly sign heralding the birth of the Messiah.

Herod knew he was not the rightful King of the Jews, he was simply a puppet king placed there by the Romans. That is why he reacts in the way he does, disturbed at the arrival of these Eastern travellers looking for a king.

The Jewish hope of God's Messiah coming had intensified over the years, so it would be reasonable to assume that the civic and religious leadership in Jerusalem ought to be delighted with this news.

However, Herod along with the established priesthood, had aligned themselves with Rome, and feared anything that would upset the status quo.

So Herod tries to deceive the Wise Men; sending them on ahead to find the child in Bethlehem, when he found out this is where the 'pretender to the throne' was to be born.

v.8 READ

Herod had no intention of worshipping or paying homage to the new born king. He wanted to get rid of him, and he was using the Wise Men to do his dirty work - locate the boy so he could kill him.

The Magi were blissfully unaware of the king's intention and happily travelled the six mile journey south to Bethlehem.

They were overjoyed at seeing the star once again that led them to the Christ child. They approached this child as they would any king **v.11 READ**

The act of bowing down and worshipping was in humble submission to his royal position and doesn't necessarily indicate that these Gentile Magi, wise as they were, knew this was the Son of God.

However, the gifts they presented show a significance beyond what they understood.

Each gift was expensive, fit only for royalty, and speak of the attributes of the Messiah.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh reflect the Christ child's Sovereignty, Supplication and Substitution.

1. Gold - Sovereignty

Gold was the most precious metal known in Bible times and was so costly could only be afforded by kings and princes. The gift of gold is fitting for the child born as 'King of the Jews.'

This title belongs to Jesus, as Matthew took pains to show in his genealogy, Jesus is in the royal line of David, and born in Bethlehem, the town of David.

But he is so much more than just the King of the Jews, he is King of all, including these Gentile Magi who bowed in homage to him. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

His kingly rule extends throughout the earth, yet rather than being a geographical area on a map, his kingdom is in our hearts. It's as we bow the knee like the Magi, and confess with our tongue, 'Jesus is Lord' that we are made citizens of this heavenly kingdom on earth.

2. Frankincense – Supplication

Frankincense was used in Israel as part of the only recipe of incense to be burned on the altar. The Wise Men probably gleaned this information from the Jewish Torah available in Persia. What they wouldn't have known is why it was so appropriate.

Burning incense on the altar was symbolic of the prayers of the people ascending to God. It could only be done by a priest, an intermediary between man and God. But a sinful people had to go through a sinful human priest, who had to atone for his own sins, before presenting the prayers of the congregation before the holy God.

Jesus is our High Priest, our perfect intermediary, because he is the God/man. As fully human he's able to understand our weaknesses, though without sin, and can make supplication on

our behalf, because he comes as the only begotten Son to his Father.

Jesus' life was filled with prayer, and now his constant supplication is for us - 'Christ Jesus ... is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.' (Rom 8:34)

3. Myrrh – Substitute

This was the most unusual and disturbing of the gifts. Yes it was expensive, like the others, but it was used in burial rites. It indicates that even in his infancy, Jesus' destiny was clear, he was born to die.

Not just die as everyone does, but die for others – he is our substitute. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

The Israelites in Egypt slaughtered a lamb and applied the blood to the doorposts and they were saved on the night of Passover.

In a similar way, we must apply the blood of Jesus, our substitutionary Lamb, that we may be saved from sin.

How do we do this? By repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ alone for salvation.

The Twelve Days of Christmas end as we celebrate the coming of the Magi, bearing gifts and receiving an Epiphany, a revelation of God in human form. They travelled far, it took a long time, it was costly – but it was worth it.

On 20th July 1969 the world heard those now famous words, 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' Apollo 11s journey to the moon was far greater and much more costly than the Wise Men. In today's terms, the cost of putting man on the moon was 288 billion dollars.

Yet that is as nothing compared to the infinitely greater cost of the Son of God leaving heaven's glory to be born in humble circumstances as a human baby.

Jesus made the journey to earth, that we might make the journey to heaven. Isn't that a gift worth having?