

7th January 2024 – Epiphany – Matthew 2:1-12 ‘They opened their treasures’

If you're watching this on Sunday 7th January, yesterday – 6th January – represents the formal end of the Christmas season. Some of you may be disappointed about that, some of you may be breathing a quiet sigh of relief – especially as our culture has more or less done away with Advent, which means we start Christmas effectively weeks before 25th December. Lots of us are probably a bit 'Christmas'd out'. But as we complete the 12th day of Christmas, we get one last hurrah – not 12 drummers drumming, it turns out, but the Feast of Epiphany, which is the time in the church's year when we think about the Wise Men or Kings.

Now, I love the wise men, they're probably my favourite nativity characters (apart from Jesus, obviously). And today is all about them. But why do I like them so much? It's not just the sense of the exotic or their strange gifts, though that helps: **the wise men remind us that the good news of Jesus' coming into the world is for everyone** – God meets *all of us* where we are, and leads the most unlikely people to worship him. And that includes people like you, or me.

The wise men, or to use their proper name, Magi, are the wildest of all the wild cards in the story (and the story is full of them). By the first century, the term 'Magi' referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. So, think 'magicians'. Other references to Magi in the bible include the magicians in Egypt at the time of Moses, or the interpreters of dreams in the book of Daniel, or Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8. You get the idea.

So, for an early reader of Matthew's gospel, the Magi aren't just Gentiles (significant though that is); they represent the height of Gentile idolatry and religious wizardry. But it's these star-gazing, horoscope-writing, would-be magicians who are the heroes in the story. The point is: they shouldn't be there. They don't worship the right God or adhere to the right religion or belong to the right race. And yet here they are, at the heart of the greatest story of them all. **God is at work in the most unlikely people – people like you, people like me.**

In some ways, they're more like the Three Stooges than the Three Wise Men! Read the story with fresh eyes and you'll notice: they go to the wrong place – they arrive in Jerusalem and have to be directed by others to Bethlehem. They speak to the wrong person – the one person who they really shouldn't talk with about a new king is the terrifying old tyrant Herod – a man so gripped by a lust to cling on to power that he has already murdered most of his own family, his wife *and* some of her family as well, because he thought they were plotting against him. A man so full of his own hubris that he builds a new palace on top of a mountain, calls it after himself – Herodium – and then uses thousands of conscripted workers to literally lop off the top of another nearby mountain so that nowhere was higher than his palace and nothing spoiled his view. (MUSTARD SEED)

And when they give gifts, it's gold, frankincense and myrrh, which – yes, have added meaning – but also were elements used in their magic. And yet, by a mysterious combination of God's loving grace and their faithful seeking, they are there – as heralds of the gospel, a gospel which, in the birth of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, the fulfilment of all God's promises, breaks the banks of the old river and floods the grace of God into the whole world.

And as we reflect on their remarkable story today, let's notice two simple things to inspire us, two simple but profound things that might help to shape the year the lies ahead.

First, they came to worship: ‘we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’ (v2). It might sound obvious, but in that one tiny detail we get a gentle reminder of one the most important truths of all. Jesus is many things to us, but our first calling when it comes to our relationship with Jesus is to worship him.

A wise old mentor once said to me: ‘Make sure to seek the Lord’s face before you seek his hand.’ In other words, it’s natural to want to ask Jesus for things. When we pray, we have lots of things we need help with – help for ourselves, help for others: we need Jesus’ hand of help. But first, we need to be close to Jesus, we need to gaze on his face, we need to worship him. Jesus is not just there for our shopping list of needs.

The wise men had, ironically, the great advantage of not realising they needed Jesus’ help with anything. They simply came first and foremost to worship him. That’s what led them at least 700 miles across the desert – or more likely, round the top of it – to see him, to spend time with him. And it’s the same for us today. The story of the Magi prompts us to ask ourselves: what is our faith built around? Yes, we need to pray in trust and dependence on God; yes, it’s good to part of a community; yes, it great to serve, and to put our faith into practice. But **all of that is secondary to our first calling: to be with Jesus, to worship him, to rest in his love and feel your heart swell in response.** The Magi came to worship Jesus – will we, this year, make that our priority too? To seek the Lord’s face first, and then to seek his hand?

Second, they opened their treasures (v11). And the point is here that these treasures were valuable, costly. They took a risk carrying gold so far across unknown lands. They took a risk handing it over to a teenage mother and her new husband, never having met them before. Their worship led them to surrender their hearts in very practical ways. They couldn’t have known, for example, that the gold would keep that family alive as they fled to Egypt with nothing else but the clothes on their backs.

Three decades later the child who received those gifts said this to the crowds who waited on his every word: ‘Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’ In other words, you can tell what a person loves by what they spend (or don’t spend) their money on and who or what they give their time and energy to.

New Year is a time for resolutions. Many of them revolve around ourselves – diet, fitness, and so on. And there’s nothing wrong with that – but can I encourage us too to consider making what you might call a spiritual resolution? **What treasures will you open and offer to Jesus in 2024? Where is Jesus calling you to be more generous?** It might be actual money, it might be time, it might be a talent you have – it might be all three.

The thing is, God always repays. The Magi not only received a dream which saved their lives, they unwittingly got to play a significant part in the greatest story of them all. Countless followers of Jesus have discovered that whenever they commit to give God something, they somehow end up with at least as much or even more than they started. It doesn’t make sense – but that’s the faith bit, isn’t it? In the upside-down kingdom of God, we only get to keep what we give away.

And so, as a new year begins, let’s be inspired by these crazy characters – the Magi came to worship Jesus, and opened their treasures to him. Will we do the same, trusting that as we do that, the Lord will not only bless and keep us, but, like the Magi, will fill us with joy? Amen.