

## Those Magi Guys And Our Worship.

Epiphany 2019

### Matthew 2:1-12

#### *The Visit of the Wise Men*

2 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, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.



#### **Introduction:**

Epiphany is a Greek word meaning manifestation or showing forth. It refers to the way Israel's longstanding hope of God's glory being revealed through her to all the nations of the world was realized in Jesus Christ. As we heard in Isaiah this morning:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. [Isaiah 60:3]

While there are many flaws and failures to lament in church history it remains a present fact of history that the faith of Israel, a people of the Ancient Near East has through Jesus Christ and his church been accepted by people of every nation and people group on earth. That is Epiphany promised and delivered – withstanding a few as yet unreached tribes.

The Gospel of Matthew points to this beginning with the visit of Pagan astrologers described as 'Magi' –think magician- or wise men from the East, perhaps Persia. <sup>1</sup>

These Gentiles -Pagans from the nations- read and interpreted the stars to find humanity's new king from heaven and came to worship. It's a curious part of the Christmas story.

Unless you are Jewish, these pagan seekers represent us.

Do you have any idea of what your ancestors were worshipping 2000 years ago? From what archeology suggests I suspect it was not a sweet business, especially in northern Europe!

This story of the first realization of Epiphany is surprising. These pagan astrologers may have had a poor worldview and bad theology but, they did understand worship in ways we might well learn from. This is what I want to look at and develop today.

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<sup>1</sup> We are not told how many there were but because of there being three gifts they are traditionally assumed to number three.

## Worship:

For about 1800 years -in my telling- the Hebrews and then the People of Israel had been learning two fundamental lessons:

- A. Who the one true God is <sup>2</sup>
- B. How do we worship this one true God

### Israel's Big Lessons:

1. Who is the true God - YHWH the LORD?
2. How do we worship him rightly?

Learning this was a very bumpy process vulnerable to confusions and distortions. The key difficulty was that God, or YHWH, is not like other gods. He is Holy meaning 'other' or not like what the neighbours worship.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the worship of the holy LORD was also something new. It too needed to be holy appropriate to the One being worshipped.

These two questions lead to 2 points of consideration essential for understanding worship.

- 1) Worship is determined by the 'object' of worship. It is shaped by that first who question. The Anglo-Saxon word 'worship' is very helpful here. It simply means giving what the other is worth.<sup>4</sup>

So the logic builds, A holy God deserves and requires holy worship.

The assumed key here is that worship / giving due worth is determined by the object of worship or in our case, the value of God and Jesus Christ.

All good, but this implies that worship is not essentially determined by the subject or the worshipper themselves. It's not about us. It is what arises or flows from us the worshipper in response to the recognized worth of the one worshipped.

- 2) Secondly, the Holy God of Israel known as YHWH made it clear time and again that worship needed to be personally authentic or genuine. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis speaks to this. Cain made his offering from the harvest of his field but he was not personally invested. He was only going through the motions and so his attempt at worship was rejected.

A shorthand for this is: "We are the worship." Worship is not primarily about getting it right to some formula or something achieved through correct words or ritual.<sup>5</sup>

### 2 Key Points on Worship:

1. It's all about the worth of the One.
2. It's personal.

<sup>2</sup> Today in the East that question still lives while in the West the question has become whether God actually exists.

<sup>3</sup> As Karl Barth would say in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "God is not man writ large."

<sup>4</sup> I am not aware of other European languages stressing this insight.

<sup>5</sup> As the medieval church claimed with '*ex opere operato*' where a properly ordained priest saying the official liturgy could not get it wrong – so long as the formula was complied with, God would smile and grace would flow.

Jesus echoed this need for genuine worship while speaking to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well when he said: [John 4.23-24]

<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Until Jesus said this the conversation had been about where people should worship and which mountain was right for this purpose. Jesus pointed to spirit and truth and dismissed the various temples of stone to anticipate the temple of the spirit God wanted us to be.

The wise men saw in Jesus a king sent from heaven so they came to acknowledge and give him his worth.

- They travelled - which took time and energy.
- They gave him attention.
- They bent the knee.
- They revered him representing their homage and worship with costly gifts.

Their theology may not have been biblical but their practice of worship was great!

### Application

So what might this mean to us here as church today?

This event here today is set up as an opportunity to worship God together as revealed in Jesus Christ.

#### Israel's Big Lessons:

1. Who is the true God - YHWH the LORD?
2. How do we worship him rightly?

The same issues Israel faced apply for us and never change:

- a) Who is God? What is his character and heart?
- b) How should we respond to his worth now in worship? / How to do that?

**Q:** So getting practical what do we actually do here?

**A:** Let's make a list:

- We turn up on Sunday - more or less on time!
- We offer set prayers of confession, praise and adoration.
- We sing prayers of praise, thanksgiving and worship.
- We make offering in money – cash or digital.
- We sign and seal our faith and hope in Christ through Holy Communion
- Etc.

My point is that these activities are not in themselves worship in spirit and truth. These activities are forms of worship we use to be able to worship.



I would compare them to the well-known love languages – different ways in which people show and receive love can include Time, Touch, Talk, Service or Gifts.<sup>6</sup>

All these things are appreciated but they are not love itself. They manifest the love and enable it to be given and received.

‘Religion’ can be the business of getting this mixed up.

A former bishop of mine once spoke about clergy ‘providing worship’. I would suggest those who lead worship provide the opportunity and encouragement to worship God in spirit and truth.

Some might be aware that those who support worship with their voices and instruments here have been wondering how best to describe themselves? There are some terrible terms out there in circulation which sometimes trickle into our conversations. The worst to me is: ‘The Worship Team’ which is used widely as referring to the band or a stage presence. That issues stirs the question as to what is a good term to describe those who sing through microphones and play instruments?

Worship via Music

In talking about this recently with Kate -our music director- she suggested ‘Worship via Music’ which I think is excellent. They are people who team or ‘band’ together to worship with music so that a whole congregation may enter into worship. They practice to be clear and confident so that we can do our best.

So we have a ‘music-via-worship team’ of singers and musicians who serve and lead by providing a way into worship for those who wish to join them. They open the way for all to follow. They lead by example.

We also need to understand that the singing or the music is not the worship.

If that were the case Jesus would not have been so impressed with the widow who gave her two small coins when others were pouring large amounts into the temple treasury collection.

I am often asked; ‘How was the worship this morning?’

That is a difficult question.

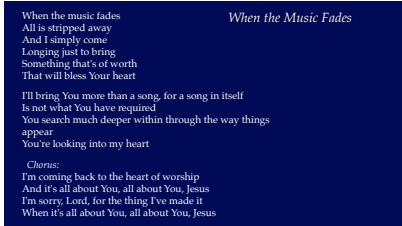
I can say if the music was good, if the church was involved or how it was for me. Was I able to worship?

But ultimately I don’t know because God can decide that two bits of tuneless groaning offers more in spirit and truth than a church hitting every note just right and raising the roof.

The song that says this best for me is Matt Redman’s When the Music Fades.

<sup>6</sup> To Learn about love languages go to: <https://www.5lovelanguages.com/2018/06/the-five-love-languages-defined/>

1. When the music fades  
All is stripped away  
And I simply come  
Longing just to bring  
Something that's of worth  
That will bless Your heart



2. I'll bring You more than a song, for a song in itself  
Is not what You have required  
You search much deeper within through the way things appear  
You're looking into my heart

*Chorus:*

I'm coming back to the heart of worship  
And it's all about You, all about You, Jesus  
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it  
When it's all about You, all about You, Jesus

This song nails it.

My second choice would be what we sang this morning as a gradual. The first verse says:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
and with fear and trembling stand;  
set your minds on things eternal,  
for with blessing in his hand  
Christ our God to earth descending  
comes our homage to command.



That hymn began as a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Greek chant so it has a majestic vision but you can hear the call to stand before God focused on him and his epiphany to us in Jesus worthy of our devoted hearts.

The music, the liturgy, the singing, the prayers are not the worship. We are.  
Paul describes this as being living sacrifices involve our physical selves:

... Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [Romans 12.1]

Friends, we are the worship brought to God corporately in song, music, prayers and holy communion.

*Part B to follow on 20 January.*