

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Wise men came seeking Jesus. They still do!

We have been looking at Luke's gospel for two services and now we turn to Matthew's Gospel for the account of the wise men or Magi from the East who were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. It was a first Fulfilment of the promise the Lord made through Isaiah as we heard in our Old Testament reading [Isaiah 60:1-3].

**"Arise, shine, for your light has come
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you
and the nations shall come to your light."**

It's a promise of light in a threatening context

The wise men travelled about 800 miles to find and worship the baby born to be the King of the Jews and a world ruler. They probably travelled in a large group with attendants and an armed escort to protect them. The journey may well have taken them 40 days.

The Magi were scholars and astrologers who interpreted the movement of the stars and tried to understand the significance of what they saw. They knew the stars and planets and their movements. Trying to discern the future in the stars is not a practice that is encouraged in Scripture. Our futures are in God's hands not in the stars. But this is another example of God's graciousness. Our God is always able to speak to us in ways that we can understand. He spoke to the Magi through the stars.

I am amazed by the programmes of Brian Cox and what modern Physicists can discover about the universe. That is different to Astrology.

Modern astronomers can calculate what the night sky would have looked like from places on our planet at particular times in history. In 7BC Jupiter [planet of world ruler] and Saturn [Planet of Palestine] were in alignment and from the middle east may have looked like one bright star.

We don't know for certain if that is what inspired the wise men to go to Jerusalem looking for the new King. We do know that the King Herod in this story died in 4BC so the timing would be about right for that. Herod had all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of 3yrs old killed. [The monk who calculated the date of Christ's birth did a good job but must have made a mistake somewhere, it is of no consequence for the accuracy of Matthew's story.]

Once the Magi saw the star there would be some delay as they decide what to do and then to prepare for a long, dangerous and difficult journey. They would not be following a star as you might follow a friend on a bicycle. It would be more like following their interpretation of what the star meant.

When they arrived in Jerusalem they naturally went to the Royal palace where they might expect to find the new king. When they told King Herod that they had come to worship the new king of the Jews Herod was deeply disturbed and it became common knowledge in Jerusalem.

Herod was morbidly suspicious, a paranoid and ruthless tyrant. He had murdered his wife and several of his own sons and other relatives. But he craftily hid his displeasure and anger from the Magi in order to enlist their help. If the Magi found the child first, then he would more easily discover and kill the child.

Herod enquired of the priests and teachers of the law where the Messiah would be born.

The scribes and chief priests knew the scriptures and were able to tell the King clearly that Bethlehem was the place to look. They didn't show any interest in going to look for him themselves or to welcome the Saviour.

Herod enquired from the Magi about the time when the star had first appeared before he sent them on their way to Bethlehem adding, "As soon as you find him report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Joseph had obviously decided to settle down in Bethlehem. By the time the Magi arrived Matthew

tells us that Jesus was no longer a baby but a child, living in a house - He may have been up to three years old.

If the child was not in a palace how would Magi know which house or which child was the promised King? Bethlehem was a village but may have had up to 30 boys under the age of 3yrs.

They may have been puzzled, just as we are often puzzled when we are looking for guidance. Looking for guidance needs patience and the faith to believe that God will lead. We also need to be active and follow the clues we have.

The wise men did not sit in Jerusalem scratching their heads. They set off to Bethlehem six miles away. Stars don't naturally move and settle themselves over a particular house. How did the Lord God guide them to the right place? Perhaps the Lord sent an angel to appear as a star leading them to the particular house where Joseph Mary and the child Jesus were living in Bethlehem.

We can't be certain how, but the God who had guided them so far did not let them down.

"They saw the star and were overjoyed."

I feel confident that anyone who wants to know God's will for their life will find it. The Magi were the first non-Jews to come and worship Jesus. Matthew doesn't tell us how many wise men there were only that they brought three gifts. Each of the costly and wonderful gifts tell us something important and significant about Jesus.

Gold - A gift for a King -

Frankincense - used by priests- in Temple worship

Myrrh - Ointment used to anoint for burial.

The whole Gospel story is alive with the Promise of God coming to rescue His people but also of deep darkness threat and risk. The spiritual forces of darkness were out to get Jesus from the beginning. They happily give their power to people like King Herod. But God's plans for blessing His world will not in the end be frustrated by the plans of evil spiritual forces nor by evil men.

When the wise men left Bethlehem they did not go back to King Herod to help him find the child because God warned them in a dream.

That night Joseph was also warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and escape to Egypt to keep Jesus safe from King Herod who was determined to kill him. They had to make a quick decision. The dangerous secret of the new king was out.

Joseph obeyed God immediately and set off to the Egyptian border 90 miles away. The gifts the child Jesus had received were very expensive things and Joseph, as a refugee, would be able to sell them to help meet the family's needs until he could find work in Egypt.

When we give our gifts and our lives to God he will use them just as he used the gifts of the wise men & the obedience of Joseph to achieve his purpose.

What is the most precious thing we can give to God?
One of my favourite carols is,

"In the bleak mid-winter."

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;

If I were a wise man I would do my part,

Yet what I can I give him: give him my heart.

The greatest gift we can give to Jesus is to give our ourselves, our lives, to learn to know and trust Him and respond in love to Him.

I don't mean some dramatic gesture or one off experience but day by day putting our trust in Jesus and following his teaching and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The life of faith is a life to be lived in relationship.
We are children of our loving heavenly Father.
We are citizens of the Kingdom of God.
We are under God's protection as sheep of His flock.

O God of light and power, as you led the wise men by a star to worship your Son,
Guide us by your Spirit to offer Jesus our worship, our gifts and our lives. Amen.