

MATTHEW 2:1-12
ST JOHN'S, 5.1.20, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION: THEY CAME TO WORSHIP

Take a moment to ask yourself why you've come here this morning. Is it just something that you do? Does it make you feel good? Does it soothe your conscience?

There's a prayer which we use every Wednesday near the beginning of the Communion service, in which we ask the Lord to cleanse our thoughts so that we may perfectly love him, and worthily magnify his holy name. This is the purpose of any Christian worship service. For whatever reason we think we come to church, the purpose of the church gathering together is to magnify God - to glorify him, to exalt him, to adore him - to *worship* him.

It's hardly an inconvenience. Maybe we think we're making a great sacrifice, getting up on a Sunday morning, leaving the Sunday papers at home, and coming out in the cold. But it only takes us a few minutes to get here, and an hour or two out of 168 in a week isn't very much. It's all part of our routine.

The wise men are a huge contrast! They totally disrupted their lives to travel to Bethlehem. They travelled for months, and quite possibly risked their lives. They probably left families behind them. They definitely left friends and their own country, where everything was familiar. Quite possibly their families and friends thought they were totally mad, going off to find this foreign king. There was no guarantee

that they would find him. That was the price the wise men were prepared to pay, the risk they were prepared to take, just for *one* opportunity to worship this new-born king, and give him their gifts. So next time you're tempted to grumble about going to Church on a Sunday morning, spare a thought for the wise men!

But who were the 'wise men' who came to worship? Why did they travel all that distance, and risk so much, to come to worship? And who was the king whom they came to worship?

WHO CAME TO WORSHIP?

All we know of these men is that they were *wise men from the east* (v 1). They were astrologers, and they began their journey after seeing something amazing in the stars. They must have been rich, to be able to afford to give Jesus such valuable gifts. They almost certainly weren't Jewish; they didn't know the Scriptures, so they didn't know the prophecy that 'the king of the Jews' would be born in Bethlehem. But they did know a little about Judaism. They knew enough to know that the Jews believed in a coming Messiah. If we put all these clues together, we can make an educated guess that they came from Babylonia. That was where King Nebuchadnezzar took the Jewish people when he destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. By the time Jesus was born, 600 years later, there were probably still some Jews living in Babylonia, who were descended from those original exiles. It seems likely that the wise men had some contact with these Jews, and that's how they knew that the Jews believed in a coming Messiah.

WHY DID THEY COME TO WORSHIP?

The wise men set out on their journey after they saw an unusual star in the sky. We don't know exactly what they saw. There are various theories. Whatever it was, they interpreted it to mean that a new king had just been born, and that he'd been born in Judea. Not only that, but they felt that the birth of this new king was so important, that they had to go and find him and worship him.

The wise men were only able to interpret what they saw because they were scholars of a sophisticated science of astrology. That science was based on the belief that the earth was the centre of the universe. We now know that the earth isn't the centre of the universe, and therefore, the wise men were studying a false science. Even so, God was able to use it to draw these wise men to worship the Christ Child in Bethlehem. The wise men's experience shows that God can meet us wherever we are, and use whatever interests we have, to lead us to Jesus.

WHOM DID THEY COME TO WORSHIP?

When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they said that they were looking for *he who has been born king of the Jews* (v 2). We don't know if the wise men understood the full meaning of this, but if they'd had contact with Jews living in Babylonia, then maybe they understood enough to know that the king who'd been born must be the Messiah for whom the Jews were waiting.

It's obvious that Herod understood this. When the wise men ask about *he who has been born king of the Jews*, Herod enquired of *the chief*

priests and scribes of the people . . . where the Christ was to be born (v 4). The Jews were waiting for the Messiah; they expected him to be a king, descended from king David, who would sit on the throne of Israel for ever. The title *king of the Jews* could only mean the Messiah, and according to the prophet Micah, he will be *a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel* (Micah 5:2, quoted in v 6).

And yet, this king, this ruler, this leader, this Messiah, has only just been born. He's still a young child. In human terms, he's too young to understand; and he lives in very humble circumstances. It doesn't look very likely that he'll really become a king. Even so, when the wise men find him, they bow down to him in worship, and present their gifts to him. Even as a very young child, Jesus is worthy of worship.

CONCLUSION

I think the wise men give us real challenge. They knew very little; they knew a king was expected, but had only the stars to tell them that he'd actually been born. They only had a vague idea where to find him. And yet, they made arrangements for a long journey, just so they could go and worship this young child, and bring him costly gifts.

The wise men's attitude is in complete contrast to the attitude of Herod. Herod was frightened of losing his political power to someone with a stronger claim to the throne than he had. Herod hated this potential rival, and was determined to destroy him. It didn't seem to bother Herod that he might end up killing God's Messiah.

The wise men's attitude is also in complete contrast to the attitude of the chief priests and teachers of the law! The chief priests and teachers of the law knew about the Messiah; they expected him to come, and they knew where he was to be born. And yet, when the wise men came looking for him, they didn't travel with them, or even after them, to Bethlehem, to see whether this really might be the Messiah come at last! They wouldn't have had to travel very far - the distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is about the equivalent of going from here to Holt. Most people would be able to walk that distance in less than half a day. Michael Green makes this comment about the chief priests and teachers of the Law:

They knew it all, but they did nothing. That is a characteristic danger for clergy and scholars in any age. Their apathy hardened into outright opposition to Jesus as his ministry developed, and ended with frenzied lust for his blood - an awesome warning that knowledge is no substitute for obedience¹ [my emphasis].

We've come here this morning to worship Jesus Christ. So let's thank God that we can come to worship him without travelling the long distances that the wise men travelled. Let's thank God that we can come into his presence whenever we want to do so. And let's give him our wholehearted worship and our obedience. Because unlike the wise men, we know the end of the story. We know that Jesus Christ is

worthy to receive *power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing*, because he is *the Lamb who was slain* - for us (Revelation 5:12).

¹ Michael Green, The Message of Matthew: the Kingdom of Heaven, (Leicester, IVP, 2000), pp 67-68