

## The Epiphany of Our Lord

### Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12

I often find it fascinating when I travel with people cars in which ‘sat navs’ are used. Now the theory behind satellite navigation systems is meant to be very straightforward; you simply enter the place or postcode you’re going from and then the same for your intended destination, and ‘hey presto!’, the device comes up with the most straightforward means of getting from A to B. In practice, though, things can frequently get more complicated than that, as we find the ‘sat nav’ leading us through rather more scenic routes than we had hoped for or even sending us down dead-end roads! It’s at those times when you probably come to the conclusion, ‘well, let’s just get the good old map out of the back of the car and re-engage our rusty map-reading skills’.

The wise men, though, certainly had *no* problem in getting to *their* destination safe and sound - the guiding star was totally reliable in directing them to

*their* journey’s end. Now despite much speculation and scholarly research, we still don’t know exactly where these guys came from (they were probably *not* kings – that’s a tradition that developed much later on) nor are we as yet sure of the precise identity of the star which they had seen and followed. Many scholars have attempted to identify the star with particular astronomical events which occurred at the time, though it does seem that what Matthew is implying here is that the appearance of the star was a miraculous event in itself. What we *do* know, of course, is that they clearly had an inkling from the nature of the star that it was the “king of the Jews” they were looking for. And so, they demonstrate an extraordinary sense of determination to go and pay homage to the newborn king, despite having to endure the hardships of the long journey to Judea from eastern lands. They showed great insight and faith, and when they arrived and knelt down before the Lord Jesus, their worship was sincere.

So, what is the significance of this event we commemorate today?

First and foremost, it's a reminder to us that the Good News of Jesus Christ is for *all* people. The word 'Epiphany' derives from the Greek word meaning to 'show' or 'reveal'. It's about God revealing his Son, the Lord Jesus, to the Gentiles (non-Jews). The shepherds to whom Christ had first been revealed, were Jews; he was, after all, the Messiah for whom the Jewish people had been waiting. But now, with the arrival of the magi (or μάγοι) from the East, it becomes clear that this Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, comes also to bring salvation from sin and death for *all* people – he is the Saviour of *all* mankind.

In our Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, we find portrayed there a vision of people from different countries coming in their multitudes to the holy city of Jerusalem; not just Jews scattered in various places, but Gentiles as well, coming to worship the living God. This was God's intention from the beginning. For when we look right back to

Genesis, to the promises made by God to Abraham, we find there that it was through the people of Israel, God's chosen people, that *all* the families of the earth would be blessed. Because of their sinfulness, though, Israel failed to live up to that calling to be a light to the nations. But in Jesus Christ, the perfect descendant of Abraham – the perfect Israelite – that vision of Isaiah is truly fulfilled. In worshipping Jesus, the Gentile wise men worship the God of Israel – the one true living God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, all people now have access to God. This privilege is no longer reserved for the privileged few, but as the Apostle Paul reminds us in our reading from Ephesians, "the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs.....and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."

Then secondly, the journey of the wise men to the infant Jesus is illustrative of the search for the ultimate meaning of life – that spiritual quest which people throughout the ages, and still in our own day, more than ever, embark upon. The magi somehow felt compelled to make that arduous journey to

Judea. They obviously had some insight into the divine within their own culture; they were, after all, astrologers, those who sought to discern the divine purposes through studying the stars – they were not totally without *some* knowledge of God. But God was now guiding them to discover in Christ the ultimate truth about life, the universe and everything.

And let's not be mistaken here. The fact that the magi were studying the stars is certainly *not* meant to be taken as an endorsement of the practice of astrology – it's not a justification for avidly looking up our horoscopes or consulting New Age gurus to find out what the stars can tell us about our futures. Rather, God works through the *flawed* understanding of the wise men in order to lead them to the *real* truth. In essence, why do they need to bother any longer with studying the stars when, through Jesus, they can know personally the One who actually made the stars. We might *attempt* to look for answers to the deep questions of life in various faith traditions, philosophies and ideologies,

but ultimately Christ *is* the one *true* end of all our spiritual journeying. If we look to *Jesus*, we won't lose our way.

And thirdly, there were the gifts which the wise men brought to the King of kings – gifts full of significance and sincerely offered: gold for the royal son of David; frankincense, as God incarnate is worthy to receive our prayers and worship; and myrrh, foreshadowing Christ's death and burial.

So what gifts do *we* have which we can offer to the Lord? In our case, perhaps not so much material objects, but rather our personal gifts, talents and skills. The beginning of a new year is a time when we traditionally make new year's resolutions; we resolve to do various things which we might not have done before – things which are usually of benefit to ourselves. But perhaps this is a good time to think and pray about how we can best use *our* God-given gifts, not for our *own* benefit, but rather using them in *his* service. And I don't just mean within the church – important though that may be. God's

mission is not confined to the Church – indeed, we should be seeking to serve God in *every* aspect of our lives. So may we “all our costliest treasures bring.....[to Christ].....our heavenly King.”

Now in contrast to the wise men, a brief word about the other characters in Matthew’s account of the Epiphany – people whose responses to the news of the birth of the Christ child were quite different to that of the magi. On the one hand there’s Herod, King of Judea. He was frightened at the news of a possible rival king being born in his territory, simply because he saw it as a threat to his own position. He was obsessed with holding onto power, which he did through force and oppressive measures, and he demonstrated hatred for anything and anyone that might undermine his authority; he wasn’t much different from prominent political dictators in more recent history. And then there are the chief priests and the scribes – the Jewish religious elite of Jerusalem. These guys certainly knew their Scriptures – that was their job, after all. And so, they were the ones best placed to advise Herod as to

where the Messiah was to be born. But notice that they never actually bothered to go to where the child was, even though for them (unlike the wise men) it was only really ‘down the road’. They had the knowledge, but they *did* nothing. In the end, knowledge is no substitute for *real* faith, *real* trust, *real* obedience. The thing is, we can know *about* Jesus, but what really matters is whether we actually *know* him personally.

So, when we look at the account of the Epiphany, we find starkly contrasting responses of different individuals towards Jesus. And it’s still much the same today. There are those, like Herod, who demonstrate outright opposition to him. There are many, like the Jewish religious leaders at the time, who remain somewhat indifferent – not really interested at all. They are presented with the opportunity of coming to the Lord, but they simply don’t bother to make that journey of faith. But may we be truly *wise* men and women, as the wise men of old, who received the Lord with great joy. May we offer *our* heartfelt and sincere worship, as the magi

did when they knelt before him. And as they offered to Jesus *their* costly treasures, so may *we* offer to the Lord our hearts, our lives, our all.

Let us pray:

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 my heart.

Amen.