

God, the Wise Men, and Herod

(Matthew 2:1–12)

If we look at our nativity scene, we see Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. But some others have arrived on the scene who weren't there before. If you've noticed, they've been making a journey across the back of the sanctuary over the last couple of weeks, and today they've finally arrived. Who are they? The wise men, with their camels.

In Bible, two different people tell us about the birth of Jesus: Luke, and Matthew. Each have got different parts of the story. Luke tells us about the shepherds, and Matthew tells us about the wise men. Luke tells us the shepherds were there very night Jesus was born, but Matthew tells us the wise men didn't come till some time later. Might have been a year or so later. How do we know that? When wise men came, they visited Jesus, not in a stable, but in a house. So there had been time for all the crowds to go, and for Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus to move into a house for a while. Also, by the time the wise men leave, king Herod thinks by then Jesus could be anything up to two years old, from what the wise men have already told him about when the star appeared. So wise men didn't get there till some time after Jesus was born. I guess they had further to come.

So in the church's year we leave a bit of a gap between the time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and when we think about the coming of the wise men. We celebrated the birth of Jesus last Christmas Day, December 25th. We think about the coming of the wise men today, January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany. That's when the wise men get here to see the baby Jesus. That's when he was revealed or manifested to them, which is what 'Epiphany' means.

Today, I want us to think about God, and two lots of people. There's always God, and what God is doing with His Son Jesus. And the two lots of people are: the wise men, and king Herod. It could be that here this morning there is God, and what He is doing with his Son Jesus, and two lots of people: those who are like the wise men, and those who are like king Herod. Or we may find that most of us are a little bit of both, and we may need to decide which we would rather be.

So let's hear the beginning of the story:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

What mean, 'to pay him homage'? Saw once a film on TV about King George VI. Queen Elizabeth II's father. He was king when I was born, and his face used to be on the pennies. I can remember when he died. We were on holidays down at Brighton, and Dad came in and said, 'The king is dead'—he was very sad, because everyone loved King George VI. On the film, it showed his coronation (before I was born!), when they put the crown on his head in Westminster Abbey. When they put the crown on his head, everybody in front of him knelt down—they paid him homage. It was their way of saying, 'You are our king. We are your servants. We will do what you say.' It's a lovely thing to say to someone you respect and love. So that's what the wise men had come all this way to do to Jesus: to pay him homage—to kneel down before him to say, 'You are our king. We love you. We are your servants. We give you what we have.' Only, Jesus wasn't a grown man, with a crown, like King George VI in Westminster Abbey. He was a baby boy, in a house, with his mother.

What was God doing with these wise men? How did they know,

from so far away, that Jesus had been born? They had seen a special star. Wise men were actually astrologers—people who studied the stars to find out what was going on. People still do that today, and write about it in the papers, and people read that to try and find out what is going to happen. Now, God has made it clear He doesn't want us to go looking at the stars to find out what's going to happen—He wants us to look to Him and trust Him—because He's the one who made the stars! But these wise men weren't doing that, so God thought, Well, if they're always looking at the stars, I'll show them through the stars! On another Television program I watched called 'Son of God' we were taken into a modern observatory, and they went back through their calculations and sure enough, at about the time Jesus was born, the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in a line from the earth, so they looked like one bright star, in a particular part of the night sky that these astrologers would have thought of as very important. (That happened in 6 B.C.—which would mean that Jesus was born about 6 B.C. How come, when he rightly should have been born in 0 B.C? They didn't start counting our years from the birth of Jesus until about the 500s, when Jesus was famous, so they had to work back. They did a pretty good job, but got it a few years out.) So God got through to the wise men that way, through what they were really interested in—the stars. That's how God got them to start trusting Him. And here they were, wanting to pay homage to Jesus as king.

So that's God and the wise men—what about Herod? Let's read on:

3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Why was King Herod frightened? Of a little baby? Herod wanted to be king, and he didn't want anyone else to be. Why were all the people in Jerusalem frightened? Because Herod was a cruel and nasty man. He'd had two of his own children killed, so they wouldn't

be king instead of him—that is the sort of man he was. So if King Herod was frightened, he was likely to do things that could damage a lot of people. So all the people in Jerusalem, who lived within reach of Herod, were frightened too.

So Herod has got all the chief priests together, and all the learned men, and he's asking them where this king is supposed to be born. So they got out their copies of the old books that we now have in the Bible, and they read out from Micah 5:2:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Here's how Matthew tells the story:

calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Matthew got it more or less right? He got the gist of it. And here was Herod, who was a ruler of Judah, who has now got his eye on little Bethlehem.

That was a quote from a prophet called Micah. Do you know how many years before Jesus Micah lived? About 700 years before Jesus was born. So here is a prophet talking about something that was going to happen 700 years later! No way could he have found that out by looking at the stars—how could Micah have known that? There is only one way Micah could have known something like this was going to happen 700 years before it happened, and that was if God told him!

And now God is telling Herod, through what Micah had written, what was actually happening 700 years later. And what God was telling Herod was very important. God was saying to Herod, If you want to be a proper king, you'll have to know the one who is the true king of all kings, who rules over the whole earth, and you'll have to be his servant. And He's the one who will be able to bring you peace from all the horrible things you do.

When King George VI was crowned in Westminster Abbey, a very wonderful thing happened to him. He didn't want to be king, and he didn't think he would make a very good king, but when they prayed for him, he just felt God's strength coming into him, and people said he came out of Westminster Abbey looking taller and stronger than when he went in. He trusted in God and in God's Son Jesus as the true king of all kings, and he knew God's strength. Herod could have been a ruler like that. That's what God was telling Herod through the words of Micah the prophet, written 700 years before.

We'll see if that's the kind of king Herod wanted to be.

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Sounds good so far, don't you think? What do you reckon? Is that what Herod really wants to do? Kneel down before Jesus to say: 'You are my king. I am your servant. I will do what you want.' We'll see.

Back to the wise men:

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt

down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In the 'Son of God' program, they said that at one point, towards the end of the time when Saturn and Jupiter were in line, they would have appeared as a very bright morning star on the horizon, just before the sun came up. This could have been what the wise men saw now. Unless it was one of those special stars that just come and go out of nowhere, from time to time. But what happened inside the wise men was more than any star could make happen. It was something God gave them inside as they got closer to seeing Jesus: 'they were overwhelmed with joy', or as one older translation put it: 'they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy'. That's what happens when you come to love Jesus as your king, as the one who rules over your life, and rules over the whole world. It's something God gives you inside—a taste of His own joy and love that He has with His Son. It's something I don't think Herod had ever felt—though he could have if he had wanted to. But I don't think he was really wanting to, because, do you know what God did with the wise men then? He told them not to go back to Herod:

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

But listen again to what the wise men did when they saw Jesus:

they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

They paid him homage. They knelt down before him to say, 'You are our king. We love you. We are your servants. We give you what we have.'

And now we're going to have a time of quiet, when we can sit or kneel down and do what the wise men did—especially if we have never done it before. We can say in our hearts to God's Son Jesus:

Epiphany
St Thomas' Church Port Lincoln

6 January 2019
Martin Bleby

'You are my king. I love you. I am your servant. I give you what I have.' And see if God doesn't give us a taste of His own love and joy that he has with His Son Jesus.

That is, unless you want to be more like Herod.