

# Epiphany: 'Treasures for Jesus'

3<sup>rd</sup> January 2010

Rev Brian Senior

## Readings:

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi – or Wise Men – came in search of 'one who was born to be King of the Jews'.

## Who were they?

The Magi were a sort of mixture of priest and scientist ... astronomers who studied the stars for learning, but also astrologers who believed the stars contained messages for people on earth. They would have been wise, learned men ... respected in their own culture ... presumably wealthy, as well, considering the gifts they brought with them, and the fact that they had the means to set out on such a long journey.

## Where did they come from?

Matthew tells us that they came 'from the East', and it is most likely that they came from Persia, which was where Iran now is. Persia was a sophisticated society and a place of learning and culture. But Persia is a long way from Israel, so we could be looking at a journey in the region of a thousand miles.

## Why did they come?

The Wise Men came because they had seen a star ... or some sort of event or sign in the night-time sky ... which made them believe that a new king had been born. But new kings were not that uncommon, so whatever they saw convinced them that this king was very special indeed.

It is interesting to consider that the Bible is very clear that God does not want us to read the stars or tell fortunes or use horoscopes - or any of that sort of thing - it is against his law ... but God spoke to these men, who were not Jews and did not know him, in a way in which they could understand.

## How did they know where to look?

We don't really know the answer to this question. It may be that whatever they saw in the stars also showed them where to go ... but it is also likely that they had access to Old Testament Scriptures which they may have studied to give them a clue. Whatever the means, it is clear that God led them to the place where they would find Jesus, because he wanted them to find him.

## What did they hope to find?

The Magi came looking for '*one who has been born King of the Jews*'. They probably thought they would find a royal baby living in luxury in the King's Palace ... that's why they went to Jerusalem. It must have seemed very strange to them that King Herod knew nothing about a new-born king ... and especially that they were then led to a little, insignificant place like Bethlehem. Not that they were disappointed, of course!

So, these Magi came looking for a King ... and reasonably enough, they went to the King's Palace, in Jerusalem. Herod, of course, was none too pleased ... but being a sly old fox he pretended to be enthusiastic about the birth of a new king, and after he had called together the chief priests and all the teachers of the law - the ones who were

supposed to know where the Christ was to be born ... they were sent on their way to Bethlehem.

Herod told the Magi to come and tell him when they had found the child ... so that he, too, could go and worship him. What he really had in mind, of course, was something completely different ... a cruel scheme to make sure that his rival was dead, by murdering every male child in Bethlehem who was two years old or younger.

So the wise Men left Jerusalem on their way to Bethlehem ... just a few miles down the road, and Matthew (2:9) tells us:

*"The star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was."*

People have struggled over the last two thousand years to try to work out how that happened. Was it a comet that they saw? ... or a particular arrangement of the planets, giving more than the usual amount of light?

The truth is that we don't know. Although we often think of the wise men following the star on their long journey from the east, Matthew doesn't actually say that. He tells us that they said they had seen his star in the east – not that they had followed it to Jerusalem.

But now this is different ... here the star does lead them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem ... and whether God used a natural phenomenon to catch the attention of these wise men, or whether it was some sort of miraculous event in the heavens, doesn't really matter.

What does matter is that God showed them the way, and left them in no doubt that they had found the right place. They were overjoyed when they saw the star ... and doubtless delighted to come to the end of their long search.

I wonder what they expected to see when they went into the house, where Jesus was with his mother, Mary? Whatever they expected, they were obviously satisfied. They bowed down and worshipped Jesus, then they opened their treasures and presented him with their gifts ... gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Just imagine, for a moment, that we can listen to the voice of one of those Wise Men, remembering the events of that amazing day ...

**Read:**

**"Meditation of the Magi" - Nick Fawcett, 'Worship through the Seasons Reflective Services for Advent and Christmas' (p128f)**

It was all worth it ... "the hassle, the effort, the sacrifice".

I wonder what you think was the most precious gift given by the Wise Men to Jesus? Before I ask you to tell me, let's have a think about the gifts.

I'm sure the Magi thought about what would be a good gift for a new king. Obviously the gifts they brought for him weren't the sort of gifts that a toddler would enjoy ... there's not much that a little boy could do with gold, frankincense or myrrh. Some might think their gifts were entirely unsuitable. But consider:

**Gold** is a gift suitable for a King ... a gift for the King of Kings.

I don't imagine there was much gold seen in and around Bethlehem ... but there would have been plenty on display in King Herod's Palace in Jerusalem, designed to remind people just who was in charge.

Gold puts us in mind of wealth and power ... not much use to a small boy, and not something Jesus had much time for during his years of preaching and teaching and healing in Galilee, and certainly not when he came to Jerusalem to die on the cross.

We are not told what happened to the gold the Magi brought ... perhaps if supported Joseph and Mary and Jesus during their time in exile in Egypt? Whatever became of the gold, perhaps it was given as a sign that this child was no ordinary boy, but the one who was born to be King of us all.

**Frankincense** is a sort of Priestly gift ... a gift for the man who was God.

Incense was burned on an altar in the temple in Jerusalem ... a symbol of the prayers of the people rising up before God. It was certainly valuable, but of even less practical use than gold to a small boy on the run from Herod's soldiers.

Why did the Magi bring incense as a gift for Jesus? Perhaps because it would be a sign of who he really was, and the divinity which was his. It must have been astonishing for these Wise Men to meet this little boy-king, and to find themselves kneeling down to worship him ... but something about him reminded them that they were in the presence of God, who was the only one by which we can come to the Father, and through whom we pray.

**Myrrh** is a gift which points to his humanity ... a gift for God who became man.

Myrrh was a precious ointment, used by healers to cure the sick, and used also to anoint the bodies of the dead for their burial. Why on earth would anyone give such a strange gift to a little boy?

Possibly myrrh was given as a sign of his humanity, that the Son of God himself really had taken on all the vulnerability of human existence, and appeared on earth as a dependent child, for us. As a man, Jesus would suffer the struggles and pain that any human being must suffer, and more as he died on the cross outside Jerusalem ... but before then he would bring healing and wholeness to many suffering people who came to him for help.

So ... have you decided which gift you think was the most precious? **Vote?**

None of these, in fact! The most precious gift they gave him could not be bought in the shops or traded at the market ... it couldn't be borrowed from a friend or made at home ... it couldn't be wrapped up in shiny paper and tied with a bow.

The most precious gift they gave him was their **worship**. We can do the same.

The Magi recognised that Jesus was worthy of all honour and glory. All they could do when they met him was to kneel before him in adoration, and offer him their costly gifts. Soon after, they went home, and we hear no more about them.

But what does it mean for us to worship him?

We can come here week by week to sing his praises, to read his word, and to bring our prayers ... but it counts for nothing unless we are willing to live it out. True worship is

worship of the heart ... much more than words and gestures and turning out for an hour of so once a week. True worship is giving our lives into his service, growing in faith and fellowship as true disciples ... letting him direct our paths for his glory. Are we willing?