

The wise men

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[0:00] This is part of Matthew's Gospel, the visit of the wise men or the three kings or whatever they are, we'll find out as we go through. And let's pray and ask God for help as we do so.

Heavenly Father, you have told us that those who meditate in your law are like trees planted by the waters.

They bear fruit, their leaf does not wither, but they bear fruit in season. As we meditate on your word this morning, may these things be found true for us as we look to you to make your word into food for our souls.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, yes, the wise men story, three kings or whatever it is, it goes on Christmas cards, doesn't it?

But as you read it, it's not a particularly Christmassy story as such. I mean, there's no snow in it. It doesn't give a calendar date.

[1:07] I mean, we all know that there is no evidence whatsoever to think that Jesus was born 25th of December. It's just a convenience. There's no calendar date in this story.

Actually, there's no birth that the child is already born in this story. There's no angels in the main part of it, although we did have angels earlier on.

And there's no shepherds. But it does have the wise men. And it has dreams. And it has a star. And it has Mary. And it has Jesus, although he's not referred to as a baby.

He's referred to as a child. And it's important for us, if we're going to do justice to this, to realize that it isn't just one thing that you remember at a certain time of year and put on Christmas cards.

It's part of the whole story of Jesus that he is presenting to us. It's part of the whole biography, if you like, of Jesus or the whole presentation of who Jesus is.

[2:06] It's here in the Bible. And the Bible is a book written for a reason. And the Bible is a book written to make an impact on us.

So we're praying that God will have an impact on us through this story this morning. Always worth looking at the context.

And Daniel's been taking us through Matthew's Gospel, the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. So in case you weren't here, it's worth reminding ourselves of what Matthew is trying to tell us.

He doesn't say this is the Gospel. But if you look back at chapter 1, verse 1, he does say this is about Jesus the Messiah. Chapter 1, verse 1, Jesus the Messiah.

Chapter 1, verse 17, he talks about the Messiah, from the exile to the Messiah. This is chapter 1, verse 18. This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.

[3:09] So I get the impression he wants to push on to us his claim that Jesus is the Messiah. And that's really important. We'll come and look at it in a moment. Messiah, it might be in your Bible the Christ.

Has anybody got Christ in their Bible? Okay, my Bible says Messiah, Christ. Messiah is the Hebrew word, Christ is from the Greek. It means the same thing. And it's particularly a king.

And as we read in Psalm 72, the idea of Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, and this is all connected with the Hebrew Scriptures, of course, is a forever king.

May he endure forever. That's a big thing. And he's an international king. He brings all the nations under his reign. And he is very close to God.

Sit at my right hand until I make all your enemies a footstool for your feet. He's God's right-hand man. And he's a cosmic, creation-renewing king.

[4:12] In that psalm, it talked about when he reigns, the corn will wave on the mountaintops and the earth will be filled with fruitfulness. And that's a way of saying, in a sort of Old Testament way, that he will make everything new.

Behold, I make all things new. That's a sort of king that the Bible is envisaging. So, this is of international relevance.

It's not just for those people in those days. And, of course, if this is true, that Jesus is the Christ, the international cosmic king, then he reigns over all the nations, and that includes us here.

So, the claim that Jesus is the Messiah is a claim that he is the king over us, over Brighton, over the Western societies, over all the continents.

And, of course, you might even have come to church this morning saying, I like to sing songs, but I'm not religious. And, of course, Jesus says, well, so what? I'm still the king. Whether you're religious or not, I still claim your life.

[5:20] You are still under my rule. So, what? I'm king over you. And that is the sort of impact that these texts make. If it's a claim that Jesus is the king, he is claiming rights over each one of us.

Well, let's take this on, and let's see what we, looking at the context a little bit further. So, Daniel took us through the story of Israel in the first chapter of Matthew.

You see it there, all the genealogy. It's a long history. And Matthew says, I want you to realize that when we come to the birth of Jesus, this isn't just a thing by itself.

It stretches way back through history. It's a story of a particular ethnic group, a particular ethnic and religious group, a particular people. They were chosen to learn God and show God to the world, but they completely failed to do either of those things.

That's the history of Israel, like us, actually. And this is set in the context of political failure and moral failure and religious failure.

[6:33] That's the situation that the Christ comes into. And if you're thinking of political failure and moral failure and religious failure, you might think, do times ever change?

Because that's pretty much where we are at now, isn't it? So, once again, I'm saying, let's not try and take this as a nice story or a standalone story.

It's part of a much bigger story. And there was that genealogy. And then Daniel took us through the next incidents of Joseph and Mary.

So, this is embedded in the life of two actual people. Mary is a nice English name. She would be called Maria, which sounds a little bit more foreign, doesn't it?

And her husband would have been Yosef. And into these people in a foreign land with actually foreign names a long time ago, God's Holy Spirit intervened miraculously.

[7:35] A supernatural intervention. An angel of the Lord. And the naming, you'll remember, is significant. Jesus. Jesus. Sounds quite English. It would be much more like Yeshua, a foreign name.

Meaning to save. And the idea of Jesus saving his people from. Now, this is a question for the listeners.

He comes to save his people from. Does it say from political oppression? Does it say from foreign domination? It says to save his people from? Their sins.

Their sins. Yeah. It's a redeeming in the moral and spiritual area to save his people from their sins. And this is coming along the sweep of ancient prophecies.

God with us. Do you remember the God with us would have been? Emmanuel. God with us. Yes. God with us. So, just trying to set it into a context.

[8:37] And let's look at the story. So, I'm not going to do anything particularly clever. We'll just go through the story a bit at a time. So, chapter 2, verse 1. It says, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi, however you pronounce it, from the east, came to Jerusalem with a question.

So, Jesus, so I put the ingredients of that up on the screen here. Jesus has already been born in Bethlehem. So, there's Bethlehem. Looks exactly like that. In the time of Herod.

Now, Herod is the king. There's the baby born. And this king, I put an H for Herod. So, there is a king in the story already. And these wise men, I gave them funny hats just to show that they're whatever they are.

Magi. We'll come to them in a minute. And off they go. And they go to Jerusalem. They've come from the east. And they have a question. So, that's the sort of basic ingredients of this story. So, let's look at, just take it a bit at a time, as I say. So, what do the wise men from the east say? They say, verse 2, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

[9:55] We saw his star when it rose. Now, translation-wise, that could be in the east. You get the same ambiguity. I'm not quite sure whether you translate it in the east or when it rose.

Has anybody got, we saw his star in the east? Yeah. We saw his star in the east, or we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

So, that's what they say. They're asking, where is he? So, they say he is born. So, he's already born. So, let's put the little baby there being born.

And they say he is King of the Jews. Now, that has a bit of an impact. So, let's put a crown. And we saw his star.

Not many babies have stars. This baby has a star. We saw his star in the east, in the rising. And the question is, where?

[10:53] Where is he? Because we want to, what does it say? We want to worship him. And that turns out to be important. We want to worship him. That idea of worship crops up.

So, this is how things start off. Let's just investigate that a little bit further. So, these magi. Not quite sure what they were.

Great ones. Powerful people. Dignitaries. Ambassadors. An insightful. Insightful. They could be like the wise men in the time of Daniel who tried to interpret dreams.

You remember those experts? They could be astrologers who look at the sky to see how the planets control us or whatever like that.

Of course, God doesn't like that. Because he controls us. You know horoscopes and things like that that people... You do know horoscopes?

[11:56] Yes. You know of horoscopes. Where you look to see, you know, what you're going to do today because of the way the planets are. And God doesn't like that because he's in control of that sort of thing, not the stars.

But nevertheless, who are these guys? They're not necessarily kings. Although, by association with Psalm 72, where it says kings shall bow down before him, people have sort of put the two together and said, well, they must be those kings.

We notice they're from the east. So, they're not bona fide Jewish people. They're outside the limits of Jewish people.

They're what we would call Gentiles, foreigners, outsiders. And in the Bible, the Gentiles, from the one point of view, they're seen as being ignorant and going off in the wrong direction.

From another point of view, they're the people that will one day be won for the kingdom of the Christ. Anyway, here they are, the Gentiles. And off they go to Jerusalem.

[13:02] And they're not the only foreigners that have come to see the king. Do you remember the Queen of Sheba? She was a foreigner who came to see King Solomon, wasn't it? So, there's a strand of things happening there of foreign dignitaries, important people, coming to honour the king of the Jews.

We notice that he is born. And so, a little picture, I think that's probably a picture of my grandson when he was born. I can't remember where I got that from.

Being born is a true human experience. Hands up, those here who have ever been born. Not everybody by the scent.

Yeah, that's a true human experience. And this king is a true human being. And they say he is born King of the Jews.

So, he's a baby who's bound to be king. And this is the claim of Jesus being the Messiah. This big, big claim that Matthew is pushing on us.

[14:13] This is who Jesus is, the Messiah. Son of David. And he's being born in David's city, as we shall see. So, this is the scene that's set of these rich, deep, powerful expectations of baby that's been born.

This Jesus who came to save his people from their sins. Let's think about the star for a bit. We saw his star in the east, or we saw his star when it rose.

Now, stars are associated with rule. Back in Genesis 1, 14, the heavenly bodies govern or rule the times and the seasons.

There's a sense in which there's an association between stars and ruling. There's actually a prophecy that uses that idea. It's in Numbers 24, 17.

And it says to the Jewish people, A star will come, a star will arise, who will be a ruler, who will, there's a star arising, who will crush his enemies.

[15:28] So, there's a prophecy that uses that idea of the star arising. So, these wise men, or whatever they were, had the right idea, didn't they? They had the right idea.

See the star. There is a ruler. He has been born. Did they get this idea the right way? I don't know. Did they do it through a horoscope? I don't know. I mean, they shouldn't have been using horoscopes. Where did they get this idea from? We don't know. But somehow, they did the right thing.

Whether they did it the right way or not, they came to honour the Christ. And I suppose it shows us something about God's wonderful sovereignty. That he can fulfil his plans with our right understanding or despite our wrong understanding.

God can make things happen. He can fulfil his plans for the Christ and indeed for us.

[16:35] Sometimes we get things wrong. We don't understand that God still can sweep up our ignorance or our misguidedness in his great plans.

He works all things together for good for his people, doesn't he? For those who love God and are called according to his purposes. And let's just pick on this idea of worship.

We have come to worship. We have come to worship him. And that idea of worshipping is in that verse.

It's also in verse 11. Am I got the right verse? Yes. They bowed down and worshipped him. So they came to worship and they ended up worshipping.

And actually, the same idea comes in verse 8. King Herod says, I want to worship as well. Now, what he was meaning by that we'll come and see in a moment.

[17:33] To worship is to humbly and properly honour. It can be used of somebody who is a human dignitary.

So I've met the mayor once or twice, different mayors. I have never fallen down on the ground and prostrated myself. But I have shaken hands in a reverent way.

And that would be a right reverence towards a human official. There is reverence and honour towards God, which is a total thing, isn't it?

That sort of worship, where you worship God with everything totally, is the worship of God, which we should not offer to anyone else like that.

And what about the worship of Jesus? How do we honour him? Now, I know to many people they would just respect him as a wise rabbi or a preacher of peace or setting a good example.

[18:45] Merely worshipping of honour given to a human being. But I'm sure Matthew wants us to see more than that. He would not be satisfied unless we are brought to worship him with everything that we have, to offer everything before him, to give him total allegiance and total honour.

The worship of Jesus being the worship of God the Father, as it were, himself. Which would we do? Let's carry the story on now into verse 3.

King Herod heard that when King Herod heard this, he and all Jerusalem were something. Was it overjoyed?

What was it? Disturbed. They're troubled. King Herod is troubled. Jerusalem people are troubled. Why do you think Herod would be troubled?

He thought it was a threat. He thought it was a threat. Thank you. Anybody else? Jesus as a rival. Jesus as a rival.

[20:04] Yeah. Do you agree with that? That would be a reason for him to be disturbed, wouldn't it? And I put, King Herod didn't want a rival for his power.

Because, did you notice, Herod is king of the Jews. He doesn't want somebody else to be king of the Jews as well. For him, the baby is a threat, not a friend.

A disturbance, rather than the bringer of peace. A rival and not a redeemer. And I suppose that text pushes on to us, how do you see Jesus?

What do you think of him? Do you see him as a threat? Or a friend? Do you see him as somebody who disturbs you? Or somebody who brings you peace?

Do you see him as a rival for the control of your life? Rather than your redeemer? It's a big difference, isn't it? And Jesus can have both those effects on people.

[21:10] Because when you first come to meet him, you might feel, who is he to start putting his finger on all the different parts of my life? That's my business. But Jesus says, no, I'm the king.

I claim the throne over your life too. Doesn't he? How do we see Jesus? Well, what does King Herod do?

Verse 4. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. He obviously hadn't been to Sunday school, had he?

Because he would, if he knew his Bible, he would know this himself. In Bethlehem and Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. So, answer. He gets together the wise men, there they are. And he gets the Bible.

[22:14] So he starts looking in the Bible. The star led them so far, but now they need the Bible. And the answer is, he's born in Bethlehem.

And he will be a governor, a ruler. And again, we're told he will defeat his enemies. So there's quite a strong streak to the character of Messiah.

Not just is he kind to those who seek him, but he is victorious over those who oppose him. And I just stop to say, please notice the importance of the Bible.

The star got them started. That was a peculiar, providential thing that God arranged. But they can't find Jesus the King without the Bible.

And I know that some people, maybe some people watching, are very keen on finding things out from YouTube. And to be honest, you can find out anything you want from YouTube.

[23:17] Right or wrong, false, true, misleading, accurate. It's all there. And if you try and find Jesus by going on YouTube, well, who knows?

You might get the right one, or he might be led in the wrong direction. The only sure way to find Jesus is through the Bible. And you don't need YouTube to read your Bible.

That's where you should be looking. And if you can get somebody to help you read the Bible, or come along to the 321 course, which will help you read the Bible, that's the way to really find Jesus. They needed the Bible. We need the Bible. What happened next? Now, King Herod, in verse 7, it says, Herod called the Magi secretly, and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I may... Well, let's come to that bit in a moment.

[24:24] Please notice the idea of carefulness. In verse 8, Go and search carefully for the child. And the same word is hidden in the translation, Find out the exact time.

In other words, carefully find the time. There's a careful inquiry about the timing, and a careful search for the child. And I would like to commend the idea of searching carefully.

There's a spiritual principle that God rewards those who diligently seek him. And if you're somebody who's been seeking God, I encourage you to do so carefully and diligently, to put some effort into seeking God.

You know, if you just wait for God to zap you with something, you might be waiting a long time. God encourages you to search carefully.

And I'd say again, Go back to the Bible. Have you actually read it? Have you read it thoughtfully? Did you just skim over it? Did you have any questions? Did you ask the questions?

[25:38] Have you got a Christian friend that you can turn to, who will answer those questions? Herod searched diligently and carefully. That's a good example.

God rewards those who diligently seek him. Well, let's go on to the next bit. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

Do you believe him? No. He searched carefully. He says he wants to worship him. Now, the idea is a good thing, isn't it? That's what this passage is all about, worshiping him.

But he was not telling the truth. He was lying. He'd already made up his mind that whatever they found out when they did this careful seeking, and whatever the Bible said, he wasn't going to take any notice of it.

Is that right? He only wanted to get rid of Jesus. He only wanted to get rid of the rival. Whatever he found, he had already made up his mind.

[26:50] He would not worship anyone else apart from himself. And there's another important spiritual principle here for seeking. Please don't seek with your mind made up that even if you get good evidence, you're not going to believe it.

There is a sort of openness that we need to ask God for. If I find evidence, I will follow where the evidence leads.

If God speaks to me, I will listen to what he says. If he shows something to me, I will take notice of it.

Don't be like Herod. No matter what God said to him, he wasn't going to take any notice. Good advice for seeking people. Let's come now to the Magi.

Verse 9. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen, whatever, in its rising.

[27:54] Well, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was, and they saw the star in that place.

So they went on their way, and the star, now let's just look carefully at what it says. So, in my Bible, it says the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them.

Is that what everybody else has got? This is verse 9. The star they had seen in the east.

And you forgot, went ahead? Yeah. Yeah, okay. It's, it can be translated in different ways. In Matthew 21, 31, Jesus says, I will go ahead of you into Galilee, and you will see me there.

It doesn't mean that I will go ahead of you a couple of feet, you follow me. I'll go ahead of you a couple of feet, you follow me. It just means, I'll get there ahead of you. And, to my mind, it makes more sense to think of the star getting there ahead of them.

[29:08] You could say it means the star led the way, or you could, because it got there ahead of them. The star got there ahead of them. There's the star. That seems to me to make more sense.

In other words, it's saying, they were in Jerusalem for several days. When they heard about Bethlehem, they set out for Bethlehem. And when they arrived, and it became dark, whoa, the star is there ahead of us.

It's already, it's already here, right overhead. And once again, we can see that God is able to use anything he likes to lead even dubious people to Jesus the Messiah.

If it wasn't like that, none of us would be Christians, would we? God can use anything he likes to lead even dubious people to Jesus the Messiah. And he used the star.

Now then, what happens next? When it stopped over the place where the child was, when they saw the star, they were overjoyed, which is a little bit of an under-translation because they find the star over the child and they rejoiced with great joy very much, which is fantastic, isn't it?

[30:25] So they go, whoopee, in Farsi, or whatever language they're speaking. They go, fantastic, we've come all this way and here it is. Here he is, actually.

There's something here deeply joyful about finding the Christ. And I don't know about you, but pressure of trying to remember the right number of Christmas cards to buy and Maria's being out, and Maria's being out doing multiple trips to Asda and Tesco and everything to get food in. We can forget that actually there's something here deeply joyful, that the Christ, the child found by these magi, they rejoiced with great joy very much.

And I encourage us all, let's not lose that sense of the joy of what it is to find the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. And what happened next?

Well, they entered, they, where are we? Verse 11, on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him.

[31:47] And they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. So they entered, they saw, they fell down, they worshipped and they opened their treasures.

And I've done the treasures in different colours and that's the magi falling down and worshipping. And that is a great sort of way to end, isn't it?

That they wanted to find the Christ, the Messiah, they found him, they were overjoyed and they offered to him their treasures.

And even that incident is just a taster of the role of Messiah. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts, Psalm 72.

The Gentiles bring their gifts to Jesus, the Messiah. And that's been happening ever since. The foreign nations bring their riches to the feet of Messiah.

[32:55] The Greeks brought their devotional and theological depth of the church fathers to which we are indebted to this day.

The Germans brought the insights of Martin Luther and the Reformation and the music of Bach to sing the praises of Messiah.

Messiah. And the Brits bring their missionary vision of people like Carey who wanted to evangelize the world. All these gifts laid at the feet of the Messiah.

And you and I, let's do the same, shall we? Shall we bring worship to the feet of Jesus, the Messiah? And I don't know about you, I don't have multi-millions of money to bring, I don't have gold and frankincense and myrrh, but I know the right thing to do is to offer my whole self to the Lord Jesus Christ, to hold nothing back, to say to him, you are my all, I offer you my all, I offer you what I have, what I hope for, warts and all, I offer myself in your service as a living sacrifice, like it says in Romans 12.

That's the right response, isn't it? Nothing less than that is a right response to this text. We offer ourselves to him. And that would be a great way to finish.

[34:34] However, it doesn't quite finish there. How does the story end? Now then, tell me, does it say the Magi took Herod at his word, they reported back to him, and Herod handed over his throne to Jesus, and he worshipped him, and they all lived happily ever after.

Is that what it says? No, it isn't. It actually becomes much more sinister. They are warned in a dream in verse 12. There's several warnings in a dream in these early chapters.

And they're warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, not to trust him, but to go back another route. So there's the wise men disappearing off into the distance, and they don't go back to Jerusalem.

They've accomplished their task. They go back another way. And where does this leave Herod? Because Herod has heard the testimony of these wise men.

There is a king, a king of the Jews, who's been born, and he has a star. So Herod has heard that testimony. And he got together all the Bible teachers and the theologians, and he said, we're Jews, we believe the Bible.

[35:48] Where does it say that the Messiah is to be born? And he had that testimony. He will be born in Bethlehem. It says so in the Bible. But he didn't take any notice.

And what more will Herod hear from God? As far as we can tell, nothing. God breaks off communication with Herod.

He had his chance to worship. And it turns out that was his last chance. Because now he's abandoned by God. As far as we can tell, God says nothing more to him.

He's had testimony from the wise men. He's had testimony from his own scholars. He's had the testimony of a star, for goodness sake.

He's had the testimony of scripture. And he's turned his back on all of that. And that's all he'll ever hear. He had his chance to worship Jesus. And he didn't take it.

[36:57] And that chance turned out to be his last chance. And it is a sober word of warning, isn't it? Our lives don't last forever.

Our health doesn't last forever. Our opportunities don't last forever. We have an opportunity today to be worshippers of Jesus. Don't let that opportunity go past.

Don't do nothing with it. you may not get another opportunity. The text raises the challenge of Jesus the Messiah.

And it puts before us these two possibilities of being a worshipper or like Herod, failing in the deepest possible way.

There's the story. Foreigners who might have got the wrong end of the stick to begin with come to Jesus via the scriptures. He is the Messiah, the forever king who saves people from their sins.

[38:09] Instead of insincere intentions there is careful searching which leads to worship and great joy. That's this story and how brilliant if all of us could say actually that's my story too.

Amen. Let's sing together this song. As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold as with joy they hailed its light leading onward beaming bright so most gracious Lord may we need.