

Seeking the king

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[0:00] I really love Christmas, but it is a bit odd, isn't it? For instance, for 11 months of the year, when you have a roast dinner, you would never dream of having turkey, would you?

But in December, they're everywhere. For 11 months of the year, I generally wear the most boring of jumpers, very plain.

But in December, crazy jumpers arrive into my wardrobe, and some of us are wearing them this evening. For 11 months of the year, trees belong in parks and gardens, but in December, they arrive into our houses and we cover them with lights and decorations.

It is all a bit strange. But there's something just wonderful that we keep enjoying about this time of year. And perhaps just for some of us this evening, it's strange that we find ourselves here in a church building, singing carols, many of them ancient words, and hearing from the Bible.

It's strange because it's not what you normally do, go to church. You're not really sure what to make of the religious stuff. Not sure about this virgin birth and angels appearing all over the place and God being born.

[1:34] And just this evening, perhaps some of us do feel a bit far away from all of this. But yet there's something intriguing.

Something intriguing about this strangeness which has brought you here this evening. Something intriguing about people gathering to sing these ancient words.

Something intriguing about the message of that first Christmas. Something intriguing about that member of our family or the friend who keeps nagging us. Come to carols by candlelight and finally, this year you've given in.

Well, let me invite you in to see some people who I think also felt rather far away from it all.

And yet they were there. They were involved and we've read about them in that last reading that Brenda read to us. They were visitors who we call various different names.

[2:38] We don't really know what to call them. Magi, wise men, kings even. And we're told that they are far away people. They live in a land far away.

They live in the east. Which many believe is Persia. Modern day Iran or Iraq. Some a thousand miles away from the events of that first Christmas in Bethlehem.

They were far away people from a far away land. Were they really welcome to be part of the Christmas story? I wonder if you've come across the term photo bombing.

It's where you're taking a nice photo of some mates or with your family. And then suddenly someone or an animal comes and appears.

I love this one. A couple taking a trip to a safari park and the giraffe has to get in there. Photo bombing. Or I think even better. A couple taking a nice selfie and then all of a sudden Queen Elizabeth, the late queen, turns up and gets in the photo.

[3:55] These wise men, traveling from afar, are they just photo bombing? Are they appearing just so they can feature for 2,000 odd years on our Christmas cards?

Is that why they turn up from this land far away? And I say that. I say it feels like they don't belong because we've been singing carols and reading from the Bible things which were spoken to a very specific people in a very specific land.

To the Jewish nation in Israel. We sung those words, didn't we? O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. Is it really for these guys?

Is it really their king and their saviour who's been born too? And can it really be for you and for I this evening? Well, let's just consider their tale for a few moments.

They arrived into Jerusalem and they recognized that this king has been born to that specific people. They asked the question, where is the one who's been born king of the Jews?

[5:15] And they asked that question because they saw something intriguing. They saw a star. We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

They are there because it's like God has put a big invitation in the sky. Which is far too important for them to ignore. And it seems to be like no other star they had ever seen.

Our understanding is that magi from the east, they were studiers of the sky. Modern day sort of astrologers and astronomers.

Much ink has been spilt about what they saw. Many have suggested that around the time of Jesus' birth, there was a planetary alignment of Saturn and Jupiter and later on Mars.

It could be that. It could have been a comet. But the Bible passage is insistent on a star. And it must have been some special star.

[6:26] And I don't have a problem with that personally, that it's a very special star. If God could bring about a virgin birth, then organizing a special star in the sky surely isn't going to be too much of an issue.

So they get their camels, we assume. We're not told that in the Bible. But we assume they didn't travel by foot. And they prepare to travel that potentially 1,000 mile journey to Bethlehem.

Now just in case over this Christmas on your travels, you're wondering about replicating their camel journey. Let me just tell you some camel speed facts. Their top speed apparently is 40 miles an hour.

Sometimes they have camel races and that's how fast they can go. But average speed is sort of around 10 miles an hour. These camels were working hard.

They were traveling a long distance and carrying a load. And so on that count, it's probably going to take over a month, probably two months.

[7:34] And their 1,000 mile round trip, 2,000 miles in total is going to take about four months. So if you're planning to travel 1,000 miles by camel, we will see you next Easter.

And this journey that they make is all based on a star. Which does seem a bit strange. Another strange thing about Christmas. Like if a friend of yours was to tell you they're off on a 1,000 mile trip by camel, you may decide to face for some help, wouldn't you?

But remember, these guys, they studied the stars. We often call them wise men. They knew a lot. They were well-educated people.

And as they saw the star, they would remember a famous ancient prophecy in the Jewish scriptures. It went along these lines.

I saw him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel.

[8:43] A star will rise out of Israel. Words spoken about a special star and a king, a scepter, something a king has, a king star. And so on that basis, on their knowledge of this and other facts, they choose to travel.

And they arrive at the capital city of Jerusalem. Very sensible. The star didn't tell them the address. Turn up at the capital city.

Find a palace. Find a king. Because this is a king star. And so they turn to King Herod and they ask, where is he? King Herod is disturbed.

That's a story for another day, really. We're focusing on the wise men. But he sends his chief religious staff to go and find out where the promised king was to be born.

And they dig out words written 700 years before this. Words from the prophet Micah about a ruler coming from of old, out of the town of Bethlehem.

[9:52] This must be who this star is pointing to, they say. And this was for the chief religious people, their promised king.

That these wise men believe has come. And it seems to me that they should be hitching a camel ride to go and see their promised king.

But they don't do that. It's a bit like being a tourist versus a local in Brighton. You see, if you come for the day in Brighton, you're going to go and see the sights, aren't you? You're going to walk around the Royal Pavilion. Perhaps visit the Sea Life Center. Explore the lanes. Go to the pier. Go to the beach. Get your ice cream. And then we who are local think, I can't remember the last time I saw the beach.

Too busy in our busy lives to notice. And so are these chief religious guys. Too busy. Too caught up in life in Jerusalem to think about traveling just a few miles along to Bethlehem.

[11:03] But this is where the wise men go. And they find the star has hovered over the place where the baby is. And they end up falling before the baby Jesus in worship.

Which seems to me another strange thing. At home, we've got a baby. He's called Micah. He looks a bit like this. He's about six months old.

I'm biased. I would say he's cute. And we've had lots of visitors over this last year. Probably may need to see him. And they go, oh, how cute he is.

And perhaps give him a cuddle. But we would be a bit freaked out if someone arrived at the house and bowed down in worship of him.

If these magi wanted to bow down before any old baby, they would have saved themselves a long old trip and could have found one born much closer to their home.

[12:08] But they had seen a very special star. And this was far too important for them to ignore.

See, this star was God's invitation to those far away. There are some more old words from the Bible, which show us this has always been the plan for people from far away to come near.

Arise and shine for your light. Arise and shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

There in Bethlehem was the glory of the Lord being revealed to people in the baby Jesus.

And these wise men have responded to his invitation to come and see. For a far off people to come from the nations and see.

[13:14] And they bow down and they present their treasures. Gold fit for a king. A king has been born.

Frankincense used by priests who stood between the people and God. And Jesus is God come to bring people to himself.

A myrrh, an ointment, a wind. Gift, an ointment used for dead people. It's not the sort of gift you want for a newborn baby.

But that final gift helps us to see he is a very different king from many of the rulers in our world.

He's not in it for himself. Nor has he come to abuse his power. Rather, he chooses to be born in a small little town.

[14:17] Placed in a feeding trough. And as he grows up, he would identify with the poor. The vulnerable, the sick, the outsiders.

Those who people saw were far off. And as myrrh really shows, he would gladly lay down his life in death.

So that many people from all over the world throughout history would come and know life forever in this king's kingdom.

These wise men were far away people but saw his star. And it seemed far too important for them to ignore.

And the Bible says that we are all like them, actually. We're all far off people. Far off because of our sin.

[15:17] Because we have not lived according to the ways that God would want us to live. Rather, the way we ourselves see fit.

But the good news of Christmas is that God has come down in this baby Jesus. And we see in this star that he is inviting all kinds of people from all over the world to him.

And as this star is an invitation, it's right that we respond to an invitation. And so just as I close this talk, I just want to ask, what about us?

How will we respond? Perhaps like those chief religious people in Herod's palace, we're going to respond, no thank you. I'm too busy.

It's not for me. Clearly there's something special about Jesus for you, but it's not for me. I'm not hitching a camel ride. And yet these wise men were willing to travel, leave home and travel a thousand miles away for months from home because of a star.

[16:34] Because they saw something special was going on. And they thought, let's investigate. Let's go and see. Maybe, and maybe for you, there's something in you that says, there's something special about this first Christmas.

There's something special about the words in these carols we're singing. There's something special about the family member or friend who keeps thanking us to come along to Carols by Candlelight. And if you see that there is something special, something about this, then this is surely too important for you to ignore.

As a church, we have two free gifts to offer to you this evening. You're very welcome to take them away. The first one is this. It's a book just on the table as you leave this evening called Is Christmas Unbelievable?

Which asks and answers many different questions you might have to the things we've been thinking about this evening. And there's another one there on the table as well.

It's called Mark. It's one of the biographies of Jesus in the Bible. And it will help you to see Jesus in there and to see for yourself who is he and who does he claim to be.

[17:53] We would love you to take them away and have a look at them. And then we as a church, we're here every Sunday. We meet at 11 o'clock in the morning and 6.30 in the evening.

And you're always so welcome to keep coming along and ask questions and get to know us. And get to know the Savior who was born in Bethlehem.

But perhaps just one other way you might want to respond is from what you already know and what you have heard this evening.

Perhaps you're even ready to bow down and worship him tonight. To say sorry for the ways you have not lived for him. And to say I want to live for you as my king.

Because if he really is who the carols and our Bible readings have said he is. He is far too important for you to ignore. I'm just going to lead us in a very short prayer which you may want to pray along to.

[18:59] Pray it slowly if that is where you're at this evening. And then we'll move to sing another carol. Dear God.

Thank you for the invitation seen in the star to these far off people.

Thank you that you invite far off people to come and worship you. Thank you.

Pray do speak to us here this evening. We would love to speak to you more about that. But we're going to continue with our carols and we're going to sing this one.

Angels from the realms of glory. We've got two more carols to go. Angels from the realms of glory. And then we'll say some more prayers to the Lord. Stand and sing.

[20:32] Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.

Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.