

The Magi

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Very happy New Year to you. Hope this year will bring you much blessing as it unfolds, as Arthur Askey would say, before our very eyes. I want to preach to you from a verse that we just had read to us by Sonia, where it says that the three Magi came to the house. They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Randomly, I was reading my successor's Christmas letter on the Diocese of Bristol's website, and she had found some research which I thought you might find vaguely entertaining.

I have no idea who would pay for research like this. What the research was there to find out was, if you played a particular role in a nativity set at school, the researchers reckon they can predict what salary you might earn in adulthood, simply off the back of that role. So here you have it. If you were a lamb, don't have to shout it out, if you were a lamb, you would earn up ending 20k a year. If you were a narrator, 24k a year. If you were an angel, 25k a year. A donkey, 25k a year. I know some donkeys who'd love to earn 25k a year. And then when you get to the kind of higher end of things, Joseph, 38 grand, Mary, 39 grand, the angel Gabriel 40. Guess who tops the list? Want to try a guess? You know the answer to everything in church is Jesus, for crying out. But actually, it's not in this case. If you want to be a high earner, you need to grab the part of the ox. Right? Now, in the middle of all this, of course, are the three kings. Very often very noble looking young people, dressed up in their parents' dressing gown and some kind of constructed crown on their heads. If you were a king, you're kind of middle range. You're going to earn 26,000 a year. Because what we know about the three kings, we mostly learn from Christmas cards, don't we? We don't actually pay much attention to what the

Bible says. The first thing is, it never says they're kings. The second thing is, it never says there were three of them. The third thing is, I have a Christmas card here. Actually, the best dressed person on this Christmas card is the camel. They've got crowns on, they've got lots of, you know, bling and all that stuff. The baby Jesus is in the crib. I think it's meant to be a halo rather than any suggestion that the infant Jesus might have cried. Because we know through singing away in a manger that the baby never awakes. My wife and I have five children, we never got one like that. So what we know about them is largely built, and you can go to Cologne, incidentally, to the cathedral there. And in the cathedral, you will find three skulls, which are reputed to be the three skulls of the three kings slash astrologers slash wise men slash... And we three kings of Orient, I mean, it just wouldn't work. I mean, that's got a nice timbre to it, hasn't it? You know, we can sing that.

You couldn't really sing. We three possible astronomers from the Far East, it just wouldn't work, would it? Enough. They were Magi. And the Magi were an interesting people. They go back hundreds of years. Some people think as far back as the time of Abraham. And the Magi were a priestly tribe. They were not a Jewish priestly tribe. They were a priestly tribe that followed some Persian religion, who believed that you could predict events, foresee events, simply by looking at the movements of the planets and the stars in the sky. So naturally, when they saw the star heading east, this bright star, it was their way of being priests just to follow the star, which is what they did.

[4 : 49] I have heard some preachers, believe it or not, some preachers use this passage of scripture to justify astrology. Many, many people, some of you will be, some of them, open your magazines and your newspapers every day and you read your astrological prediction. Which probably, you have to say, you know, given that most newspapers have circulations in tens of thousands, probably is a rather generalist approach to kind of make decisions about your life. Interestingly, in the book of Daniel, I think we find out the real truth about astrology. And you remember the background to this story is that this king called Nebuchadnezzar has a dream and he asks all his astrologers and his wise men, who are on his payroll, of course, he asks them, what is

this dream? Who can interpret this dream for me? And the astrologers are very worried by this question because Nebuchadnezzar is a guy on a short fuse and if you said something to him that he didn't like the sound of, you probably would end up being no more. So the astrologers come back to

Nebuchadnezzar when he asks them to interpret the dream. This is what they say, there is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks. No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods and they do not live among men. And Daniel shows up. And Daniel hears the dream, the king narrates the dream to Daniel. This is what Daniel says. Daniel says, no wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner, can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come.

Your dream and the visions that pass through your mind as you lay on your bed are these. And he goes on and interprets the dream. You see what's being said here. That personally, I personally think astrology is mumbo jumbo. But even if there's a shred of sense in it, the bottom line is, Daniel got it right. There is a God in heaven who reveals himself and his will to us. And we would be better to stick with him who created us rather than read the wittering of people who are writing astrological reports. I mean, I don't know what it means if Jupiter's passing Mars. And frankly, I don't care because I'm going to stick with the living God. Amen? Amen. So what do these Magi teach us? That's a very critical question. If you compare the attitude of the Magi, who were from the Far East, were probably of dubious theological background. If you compare their attitude to that of Herod, you are talking about chalk and cheese. Herod pretends that he's interested in finding the babe, the Messiah, to use his word. He's not interested in the Messiah because he wants to worship him. Oh, that's his stated aim. He's only interested because he sees that somebody who might become king of the Jews will be a threat to him. And he's only interested in that child so that he can kill the child. You compare that to these theologically dubious people from the East who've come to worship Jesus. You're talking about two different things. And I want to say that this passage of Scripture teaches us three very important things that we need to know, not least at the beginning of a new year. And I want you. I have no way of making you. But I want you this year to think on these things. And I even am bold enough to ask you to be ruthlessly honest with yourselves when you make some kind of assessment, some kind of audit of where you are in your relationship with God. The first thing we learn from these people is the difference between false religion and living faith. Herod was only interested in Jesus because he wanted to kill him. These theologically dubious men were interested in him because they wanted to go and worship him. Somebody has described the Church of England as cultural Christianity. To attend the Church of England is a bit on a par with red telephone boxes and steam trains. It's part of our kind of national fabric. And in fact, if that were true on its own, it would mean that you could sit in the... Well, you can't sit in the pews in this church. We've taken them all out in business class seats. You can sit in these seats and apply cultural Christianity to your life.

[10:53] And if Jesus didn't exist, it wouldn't make any difference to you. Right? Say that. And part of our inherited fabric just feels comfortable, doesn't it? John Betjeman described the Church of England as like putting on a warm pair of slippers. Somebody said the Church of England... Everybody thinks that the Church of England belongs to them, even though they don't belong to it.

I've never forgotten, when I was in local church ministry, we decided we would floodlight our church in the evening. And can I just say, nobody talked about light pollution back in the day.

So we thought we floodlight our tower, it'd all look nice and, you know, everybody would be happy. Except one guy came in to the annual general meeting of the church and kicked off Major League. I had never seen this man before. He wasn't a church member. And so the next time I saw him was with his large dog in our churchyard. Turns out that his large dog loved our churchyard, primarily as a lavatory.

So I said to him, you know, I'm interested that you'd have such strong feelings about illuminating the church, since you never set foot in the place. He said, what do you mean?

[12:19] I said, well, I wouldn't dream of, you know, are you a member of a club? Yes, he said, I'm a member of a local archery club. I said, I wouldn't dream of coming to the archery club and telling you what you needed to do or not to do.

It is true that if you're on the electoral roll of a church, and you can get on without ever attending one if you are a resident in the parish, you can turn up at the annual general meeting and make the vicar, I'm not suggesting you do this, but you can make the vicar's life very tough.

That's not my point. My point is this, that there is a thing called cultural Christianity that haunts the corridors of the Church of England, which means that you can attend a church and know nothing of Jesus.

You have never had, to use that powerful word that Clive used in the introduction, you have never had that encounter with him. The Magi teach us that faith begins with an encounter.

In this story with a baby in a manger. People often say to me when they find out what I did for a living, they'll say to me, well, of course I'm not religious.

[13:46] And my response to that is, well, nor am I. I'm really not religious. By religious, I have very little passion. I shouldn't probably be saying this to you as a former bishop.

I have very little patience with all the kind of claptrap that goes with religion. Dressing up, all that stuff. Never really felt cool about that.

I don't think I am religious in that sense. Religious in the sense of, I love Jesus Christ. And I want him to affect everything I do in my life.

If that's religious, then I'm religious. But the rest of it is just hoopla to me. Are you religious? Don't shout out.

See, let me just show you the hallmarks of godless religion. The first thing is, if your religion is godless, you are trying to earn your salvation rather than relying on the grace of God.

[14:47] Say it again. If you are just religious, you are still trying to earn your salvation rather than rely on the grace of God revealed supremely on the cross of Calvary.

Second thing is, if you are just religious, you will know about God, but you won't know him. Why? Why? Jesus came so that in human form we could start to understand, never fully understand, but start to understand what God is like.

If you are religious, you will be far more concerned about your outward appearance than you will about inner transformation in your life.

As long as it looks good. I have stood for many, many hours at the back of a church at the end of the service, shaking hands with the saints, so they went out, you know, hi Mary, how are you?

Everybody says, fine. Why? They are consumed with what people think of them rather than what God thinks of them.

[16:01] It is extraordinary, isn't it? I remember a lady one day, she is coming out and said, oh, hello, how are you? She said, I am in a dreadful state. I am like, that is the wrong answer. Get to the back of the line.

Sorry, this was a joke. I did not say that. Outward appearance will matter to you more than inner transformation.

Deadly, you will think of your life as a journey, but you have got no idea where it's headed. Whereas the Bible teaches us, in Christ, we're headed for heaven, for eternal life.

These are just some of the characteristics of false religion. Any of these behaviors, I mean, you could, you know, I could get you to fill in a piece of paper saying which of them apply to you if they do.

And you might say, well, I'm okay, you know, three out of four, I'm fine on that, 75%. I would have settled for that in college. Wrong. Any one of these applies to you.

[17:08] And you have some thinking to do, my friend, in this new year. Peter wrote these words. He said, come to him, the living stone, rejected by man, but chosen by God and precious to him.

These strange men from the East teach us that there is a difference between false religion. People who just say stuff for the sake of saying it, like Herod.

And false religion. The second thing that they show us is the difference between true worship and false worship. Never forgotten a story that David Bubbers of the Church Pastoral Aid Society told me.

He said that there was a mum in church for the first time, and it was a church with pews, and they kept standing up and sitting down, standing up and sitting down, kneeling down, standing up, sitting down.

Child talked to his mother. He said, what are they frightened of? Who are they hiding from? Scripture.

[18 : 18] John's Gospel encourages us to worship God in spirit and in truth. Herod claimed he wanted to worship God, but he didn't want to worship him, did he?

He wanted to put him to death. What would be the hallmarks of false worship? Well, the first thing is, false worship would just be attending church without adoring God.

The second thing is, it would be clock-watching, not Christ-focused. Do you ever do this? I mean, I've put my hand up. I have done it myself, right?

You get to the end of a service where the minister's droned on. I know. And Clive leaps up, and Julian leaps up, and they tell you, this is the last time you're like, oh my gosh, it's the seven-verser. You know, remove all sharp objects. Look, if you're watching the clock, and I am, as a matter of fact, because it's up on the wall up there, that's not focused on Jesus, is it?

[19 : 35] That's focused on your lunch. Or focused on something else. I don't even know if you can get this.

You can probably get it on Kindle, but I think there's a book that I would love for all of you to read. It's written by a great old preacher of the church, long since he died, called A.W. Tozer.

And Tozer wrote this book, and it's called Whatever Happened to Worship? And in that book, he says a number of things.

In the foreword, Graham Kendrick writes this, and he's quoting directly from A.W. Tozer.

In some circles, said A.W. Tozer, God has been abridged, reduced, modified, edited, changed, and amended, until he is no longer the God whom Isaiah saw high and lifted up.

[20 : 39] He has been reduced in the minds of so many people. We no longer have that boundless confidence in his character that we used to have. I have spent my life going from church to church in a peripatetic ministry.

And it breaks my heart to tell you. But I fear that might be true. I fear it might be true. That we've just reduced God.

Tozer goes on. I mean, there's so many good things in it. He says, let me say two things about worship. First, he says, I do not believe it is necessarily true that we are worshipping God when we're making a load of racket.

But not infrequently, worship is audible. Second, he says, I would warn those... And this really does fit the Church of England. Second, I would warn those who are cultured, quiet, self-possessed, poised, and sophisticated, that if they are embarrassed in church when some happy Christian says amen, they may actually be in need of some spiritual enlightenment.

Yeah, worshipping saints of God in the body of Christ have often been a little noisy on this front. Don't you love that picture?

[22 : 10] I mean, I even love this postcard, although it's factually all over the place. I love it. I love the idea that these men, who as I say, had at best a dodgy theological background, could come to that crib, see that baby, and worship him.

I mean, if that doesn't strike you as extraordinary, I don't know what would. And the third thing is, there is a message from the crib, by this encounter that the Magi had with the Lord Jesus.

And the message is this. All are welcome. All are welcome. You think about that.

I think there's this thing whereby, we kind of think that if you're going to, you know, follow Jesus, if you're going to go to church, you've got to be a bit different.

You've got to have something special about you. There's a church sign I passed in the States that said, only sinners welcome.

[23 : 26] It kind of gets the tenor of what I'm about to say to you. In Downing Street, there's this very highly intelligent man. You'll hear him on Radio 4 occasionally, called David Halpin, who is a behavioral psychologist who advises the government on policy.

So that they might, you know, create policy that might actually be good. And Halpin has this thing, it's very interesting, borrowed from the world of marketing.

He says that people identify with things far more if they feel it's for people like us. Well, friends, the truth is, there are a lot of people in Cleveland, there are a lot of people in Bristol, there are other people in the United Kingdom who don't feel when they look at us that we are people like them and they are people like us.

There is a kind of veneer of self-righteousness, a veneer of judgmentalism that can so readily become the mark of the church and it gets in between people and an encounter with God.

Dr. Sangster, that very caustic Methodist minister, I hope Ross won't mind me referring to him as such, used to say to his congregation on a Sunday morning, you realize a lot of people aren't in church this morning because you are.

[24 : 54] I'm not saying that. Shepherds, ordinary working men, even animals, dirty, smelly, lovely animals are welcome.

And anybody who wants to come and encounter Jesus is welcome. You say to me, well you don't know what kind of a life I've been living, I don't care what kind of a life you've been living, the truth still holds.

If you want to come to Jesus, the manger door is open for you. It's not for special people.

It's for people who recognize they're not special, who recognize their ordinariness, who can become extraordinary in that encounter with God.

At the heart of worship, and we see this in the Magi, is the idea of offering. When I come to church to worship, I come to offer myself to God.

[26 : 20] All that I am, all that I have, all that I ever will be, is a gift from God. And when I worship God, I offer that to Him.

In the hope that He might deem me faithful, and help me use it to serve Him, and to serve this world which He loves. And of course, the reason why it starts with encounter is that in a few moments, we're going to be celebrating Holy Communion.

Reminding ourselves that the grace of God dawned upon the world at the cross of Calvary, where the Son of God made His own self-offering, so that we could be set free and forgiven, and turn from rebels into worshippers, turn from unbelievers into believers, turn from dispassionate to being on fire for God, friends, let me tell you this, that the millions of people who think that lying in bed is a better choice than showing up to God, a half-hearted army, will never impress them.

We need to wake up, and to step up, and understand what real, living faith is. Understand what living worship is.

And most importantly, understand that you are welcome, and maybe in your mind's eye today, you need to come to that manger of old, and push open the door, and discover for yourself the welcome that awaits you.

[28 : 18] In the name of our wonderful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the people who agreed, said together. Amen.