

Advent Week 3: Star - 11th December 2022

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[0 : 00] This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.

But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us.

[1 : 28] When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus.

When Joseph woke up, he did not have a son, and he gave birth to a son, and he gave birth to a son. And he gave birth to a son, and he gave birth to a son. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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.

In Bethlehem in 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. Then Herod called the Magi secretly, and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

[3 : 10] 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 too may go and worship him.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose, went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

If you're a fan of the night sky, it's been a pretty good week for stargazing here, indeed, even planet gazing. Because on Thursday night this week, and just to get all Brian Cox on us for a minute, there was what's called a lunar occultation of Mars.

[4 : 22] What's the lunar occultation of Mars? Well, apparently, it's when the moon moves between us on Earth and the planet Mars out in space. A kind of Mars eclipse, I guess.

And for the night sky nerds among us, of which I'm sure there are some, this was a rare event made rarer because it happens during a full moon as well. And so there were some cracking photos taken, like this one.

This is taken from a photographer called Andrew McCarthy, who's an astrophotographer. It's taken from his backyard in Arizona, and from the Earth he took a picture of the moon with Mars popping

up behind it.

I think it's an amazing photo to be taken from your back garden, I tell ya. I mean, on clear nights, I guess, like we've had this week, with the orangey-red glow of Mars being clearly visible to the naked eye, and you might even see it tonight when you go home still as well.

With the full moon and stuff and all sorts of stars shining. It perhaps gives us, it certainly gives me, when I look up, a sense of wonder, I think, at how massively amazing our galaxy, indeed, our whole universe is.

[5 : 35] But also, at the same time, how small and seemingly insignificant we might feel in comparison to that big picture. And then I wonder if that's perhaps how those wise men felt at that very first Christmas, some 2,000 years ago, you know, as they looked up and studied the night sky.

Perhaps it seems, seeking some sort of bigger picture, if you like, to make sense of the world and to make sense of their lives within it. Now, we're not told much about these wise men, these stargazers.

They're described as magi in Matthew's Gospel. Magi being an ancient word with roots in magic and astrology. You know, it's pretty mysterious at best.

But the fact we're told that they came from the East, not Norfolk, probably from around Iran, we reckon. They may well have been followers of the Zoroastrian religion.

It's an ancient Eastern religion, which shares a lot of common ground with what we might believe today. So they believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of there being a Messiah-type figure who will come to save the world.

[6 : 47] They believe in one God who is the source of all wisdom and so on. And I guess that's partly why these guys are called wise men, perhaps.

Because wisdom and the God who is behind that wisdom, that would have been a key belief for them. And I guess also, when there's so much conflict caused these days by religious differences, I think it's interesting how diverse an array of people, including these Eastern mystics, were drawn to and ultimately welcomed by Jesus.

Jesus' welcome is always broader and much more inclusive than we might imagine. What else about these wise men, though? Well, we're told that they'd seen a star appear in the East.

A star, they believed, which signaled the birth of a new king. A new king they felt called to go and worship. And so they followed the star where it appeared to lead them until they came to the land of what is modern-day Israel and Palestine, Judea, as it was known back in the day.

Now, since these wise men interpreted this star as signalling a royal birth, as we've just been singing, where best did they think they were going to find this king they were searching for?

[8 : 05] Well, perhaps understandably, they'd not only go first to the capital city of the country, which was Jerusalem, but they'd go to the king's palace there. I guess if you're looking for a king, you go to the palace.

And yet, on arriving at the palace in Jerusalem, they're greeted by the guy who is already the king of the Jews and has been for some time, not a newborn baby who would be king of the Jews.

No, they're greeted by an old man by the name of Herod, King Herod. And as Matthew's Gospel tells us, when Herod heard their talk of a new king in town, he was disturbed, as we're told in Matthew.

That's quite an understatement, perhaps, because pretty soon he'd be scheming to have this new baby Jesus killed in order to do away with any potential threat to his throne.

And I guess in all of this, the fact that they went to Jerusalem, went to the palace and so on, I guess for these wise men, you know, for all of their wisdom, for all of their good intentions, perhaps for all of their sort of cosmic, stargazing insight, it seems to me these wise men actually got things, initially at least, pretty wrong.

[9 : 17] You know, they'd assumed that this new king would be just like all the other kings that they'd heard about. Born in the finest of palaces maybe, you know, raised with huge wealth and privilege.

Royalty, if not of Netflix specials, then certainly of real social status. You know, someone recognisably royal, we might say. You know, in their search for answers, they'd gone to the obvious, predictable place.

And yet, it seems, in assuming that Jesus would be born in a royal palace, in some ways it seems they'd taken their eyes away from the star which God was leading them by.

And it's easily done. You know, I know I, I guess we, we can all be distracted by things which cause us in a way to sort of lower our gaze a bit, lower our eyes from God.

And instead, focus perhaps on what we might call the bright lights of the world around us. Things like popularity or prosperity or promotion.

[10:24] You know, they can all entice us with predictable promises of purpose perhaps. Yet, very often, their promises end up being pretty empty and perhaps unfulfilling.

Instead, it seems, keeping our eyes on God and the way of life he calls us to, well, it can lead us into a far more fulfilling life. And indeed, as Matthew's Gospel explains, as we heard it, it said, After they heard King Herod, the Magi went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them.

It stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

You know, the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth. In the skanky squalor of a stable. In an unmarried family setting, which at the time would have been pretty scandalous.

What I'd say indicates that in Jesus, God comes to be with us in ways which are anything but predictable. Yes, Jesus had indeed come as a king, but a king of a wholly different kind of kingdom.

[11:44] A kingdom, a way of life, not of wealth, but of wonder. A way of life, not of superiority, but of simplicity.

A way of life, not of luxury, but of love. Thankfully, we're told the wise men did eventually find their way to Jesus, and to this way of life that he was ushering in.

And it seems to me that as we look, I think as we all do in our own way for answers and for meaning, we might say for hope and peace and joy and love in life.

Well, I'd suggest we do well to allow the story and the circumstances of Jesus' birth to shape our understanding of what a fulfilled life looks like.

That means, I think, that we'll see God most clearly this Christmas. Not perhaps in the celebrity specials or in the filtered FOMO photos of people trying to impress us on social media.

[12:47] But probably, in the kind words of a Christmas card, sent to the widow who'll be having her first Christmas without her husband.

I think we'll see perhaps God most clearly this Christmas. Not maybe in the excess consumption of those who have more money than sense. But in a generosity of those who stick an extra food bank parcel in their basket at Morrison's.

Or who take time to speak to and support the guy selling the big issue in the freezing cold outside Heron Foods down at Sankey's. I think we'll see God most clearly this Christmas.

Not perhaps in the private parties where only the select few are invited. But in those places offering a warmer welcome. Where locally all sorts of churches and businesses, pubs and clubs are offering free hospitality to folks who may otherwise be home alone and worrying.

How they're going to afford to eat and to heat their home. Now I know for many of us, indeed so many of us are so diligent in generously, faithfully doing what we can to offer hope to other people in our own way.

[14:03] And that's why I think the community spirit in our town makes this such a special place to live. There's something special about Burntwood. And I hope and I imagine you know that.

And I guess in tandem with our wider town, you know, as a church we try and prioritize these kind of things. You know, the generosity of spirit and so on here at St John's.

We don't always get our priorities right, but we try to make generosity and welcome one of our main aims, I suppose. And I guess that's where things like Burntwood Be A Friend come in.

Things like the Christmas Day lunch here, which businesses like Affinity Home Care and Bradshaws are supporting. That's where those kind of things come in. That's where say, I don't know if you've seen in the park next door, the new pieces of play equipment that are going into Chase Terrace Park, where they come in.

So there, for example, through your generous giving to us as a church, we've been able to partner with Litchfield District and Burntwood Town Council to help fund what's going to be a new roundabout and a new spinning seesaw next door.

[15:12] Hopefully, they'll be ready all before Christmas. And I guess for our part as a church, it's really just a simple way for us to perhaps hopefully give a little bit more joy to local kids this

Christmas in our community and beyond.

elsewhere, though, in Burntwood, I'm sure you'll have seen places like Strawberry Fields and their fantastic Toy Appeal, which they've organised again this year to ensure that in these incredibly tough times, parents can give their children's presents, which they may not otherwise be able to afford.

Or then there's the privilege that I've got next week of delivering 10 Christmas dinner hampers to local families, which the team at Crown Highways just down in Chase Town have collected for families who could do with a bit of help perhaps this year.

What else? Well, you'll know there's the Burntwood Be A Friend Community Store, which is not a food bank, but is a shop open to all where surplus food from supermarkets is available at real knockdown prices.

And it's a win-win in terms of both affordability, but also reducing food waste. And if you're not yet a member of the community store down at Sandquies, please do go along and become a member, because the more people that use and join that store, the more long-term viability that important project will have for our town.

[16 : 35] And I could go on. You'll know other ventures, other initiatives that go in on locally as well. I hope you get the picture in a way, because all of these kinds of things, you know, these gestures of generosity, perhaps the caring companionship and so on that's on offer.

They, or I would say, is at the heart of the story of life, which Jesus begins at Christmas and then builds on ever since as he brings his light, like those candles, into our lives.

So yeah, perhaps on our way home tonight, as we look up at the stars in the night sky, we may well feel both a sense of wonder at what we see, also perhaps a sense of smallness at quite who we are in the grand scheme of things.

But I guess just as that star eventually led the wise men to encounter the unpredictable presence of Jesus as Emmanuel, as God with us.

My prayer, I think, is that we too may be led by Jesus himself this Christmas to be present with people in ways which not only give our lives purpose and meaning, but which bring his hope, his peace, his joy, his love to all those who God has given us to live alongside.