

The Journey to Joy

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[0 : 00] Good morning again, everybody. Good to see you. We're going to read from Matthew chapter 2.! And whenever I read this passage, I always think of nativity players.

! I think because when I was little, I was once an angel. It's hard to believe, isn't it? I was the angel Gabriel when I was in primary school. Well, I read the story. That's as near as I got to dressing up. Because the suggested dressing up was like a white nightie with some gold tinsel around your head, and I refused. I wasn't going to do that. But for some reason, I always thought angels were girls because of that. And I must have thought that Gabriel was a girl's name too. But I really wanted to be a wise man because they were kings. And I would have dressed up like one of them. Pretensions of greatness. It's funny, isn't it, how nativity stories kind of mislead you. Like make you think that the child in the manger was called Wayne and stuff like that. That wasn't my joke. That was a head teacher's joke.

Apparently a true story. What's the name of the baby in the manger? Wayne. How'd you know that? A Wayne in a manger. That's why. Just in case you didn't get the joke. And this passage does its best to kind of mislead people. Lots of mythology has arisen out of this passage. And I'll correct some of that, only to leave you slightly more unaware of the exact events that surrounded this. But it's shrouded in mystery for a very good reason. Because we're not meant to pay attention too much to the wise men. We are meant to pay attention to the baby that they worshipped, or the child that they worshipped. So chapter 2 from verse 1.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem and Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who was being born King of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed in all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the peoples, chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

[2 : 21] 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Then 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 make a careful search 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 in the east 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 and incense and of myrrh, and having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

It's so easy to read, isn't it? It is such a familiar passage that we miss so many magical and magnificent moments in this passage, so I hope to draw attention to them.

[3 : 36] So we're looking here at the journey to joy. We've looked at the Herald of Hope, at the Path to Peace, Pathway to Peace, and now the journey to joy.

And this is Advent. And if you were in a more traditional church, perhaps a high Anglican or Roman Catholic church, you would have candles like this, but they would be different colors. Three would be purple and one would be pink, and today it would be the pink one, because purple represents repentance, penitence, whereas pink represents joy.

And it's rose pink, to be precise. And it's meant to be a time of penitence, Advent, as we lead up to Christmas Day, a time of anticipation, but also punctuated with joy as we look forward to the coming of Jesus.

And so today the focus is on joy, the journey to joy, and of course the wisdom of the wise men. And so I thought I would share with you seven wise sayings that we do well to take to heart, I'm going to do them in reverse order.

Number seven, the world is full of apathy, but I don't care. Okay, keep up. Number six, I have my doubts about unbelief.

[4 : 59] Number five, I'm so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I'm saying. That was Oscar Wilde. Number four, from Plato, wise men speak because they have something to say, fools, because they have to say something.

Yeah, I'll say that again. Wise men speak because they have something to say, fools, because they have to say something. Number three, it's not paranoia when they really are out to get you. Number two, if at first you don't succeed, you are setting yourself up for failure.

Yeah. And number one, if at first, sorry, number one, is also an if at first you don't succeed. Number one, if at first you don't succeed, then please don't try skydiving.

Wise saints, and we do well to heed them. Wisdom is an important thing in Scripture. Wisdom to live by.

And wisdom is not, of course, intellectual knowledge alone, although it involves that. It is also the application of that knowledge that leads to experience, to understanding, and to good judgment.

[6 : 19] Wisdom allows us to make sound decisions, to navigate life's complexities, and to discern what is truly important.

In the Scripture, you need wisdom when you're choosing your friends. You need wisdom when you're choosing a spouse. You need wisdom when you're making decisions about work and life and the spending of money and everything else.

Wisdom is such an important quality. Wisdom takes into account the long-term consequences of actions. So that allows us to discern between, you know, will I do something, go somewhere, I don't know, jump off cliffs or whatever, or do I want to live a long time?

You know, this kind of thing. And, of course, whereas the short and medium-term decisions that we might make might be attractive and exciting, if they're going to kill us, they're not very wise decisions to make.

So we take into account long-term consequences. It's, as I've said, more about, more than just knowing facts about something, it's also acting upon those facts and then deciding whether or not the course that we've taken is the right course.

[7 : 38] And all of these things make up wisdom. And those who live by them and apply them become wise people. And so we are introduced to wise men.

And they are wise men not just because of their knowledge, and they had great knowledge, extensive knowledge, they were astrologers, but they were more than astrologers. They could read the stars. They were also politicians.

They were also advisors to kings. Hence, Daniel was a wise man. Wise man. And these are wise men from the east, possibly Babylon, and possibly learned in the tradition of Daniel.

So they weren't just well-educated. They were people who give guidance to people in authority, to people in authority, and the people in authority governed their kingdoms by the guidance that came from the wise men.

These were people whose wisdom was acted upon. And we're told that they are wise men from the east who were guided by a star to find and worship the newborn child, Jesus.

[8 : 47] And that reminds us of the importance or the end goal of why Jesus came into the world. Jesus came into the world to be worshipped.

And when we encounter Jesus, like the wise men, we worship him with joy in our hearts. They were filled with exceeding great joy, the King James Version says.

Exceeding great joy. Four words are used there to kind of show that they were ecstatic because not only were they there in a stable bowing down at a manger, they knew the full implications of what this birth meant for the world.

How it would utterly transform the world, which is merely a historical fact, by the way. And the world would never be the same again because this light had come, this baby had come, and this joy had come into the hearts of those who truly worship at the feet of Jesus.

So joy is the key theme of this passage that I'm picking out today. And you remember that the angels, when they announced the birth of Jesus, said, there is good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

[10 : 06] And when the shepherds heard the song of the angels, it says, when they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. They were full of joy. And when Mary sang her song in prayers to the God who had given her this child, she says, my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

And the Magi or the Magi join in with that joy. So nativity should elicit in us great joy. I've got a quote here from an old pope, St. Leo the Great.

He says, sadness should have no place on the birthday of life. I love it, love the way he describes it there. The birthday of life, this utterly transformative thing.

When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, says Paul, to redeem those who were slaves to that law. Sadness should have no place on the birthday of life.

[11 : 24] The fear of death has been swallowed up. Life brings us joy with the promise of eternal happiness. No one is shut out from this joy. All share the same reason for rejoicing.

Our Lord, victor over sin and death, finding no man free from sin, came to free us all. A wonderful statement. That is why there is joy.

Joy to the world. The Lord has come. And so from this passage, I want us to learn three important truths. The first thing is the importance of seeking and following God's guidance.

A little more about the Magi or Magi, however you prefer to say it. We've already said they're from the East. They're important political advisors.

They're astrologers. So they're looking to the stars and they see this unusual star out to the West. And they wonder, wow, this has significance.

- [12 : 26] Now, I don't know what goes on in their mind and how they kind of get back to its significance. More about that later. But nonetheless, they act upon a sign that is given.
- And this sign, though they don't know it at this moment perhaps, is a sign from God that they are seeking to follow. And incidentally, do you follow signs from God? Yeah, a lot of people get signs from God.
- You know, God will, they say, God, please speak to me. God, as I pray, please give me a sign. And then they get a sign and they say, oh, that's great, I've got the sign.
- And then they get on with their life. But the point about signs from God is not merely to kind of get an answer to a particular problem. It is to get to know the God who gives you the sign.
- If God speaks to you, if God in some way does something in your life that you think, this is not just a coincidence, somebody's trying to tell me something, then get your ears open and start listening to the God who is trying to tell you something.
- [13 : 27] If you say sometimes, somebody up there likes me, get to know his love. If you say something like, well, that didn't happen because it wasn't meant to be, get to know the one who knows what your life is meant to be.
- That's the point of signs. So these wise men, they got a sign and then journeyed toward the God who had given them the sign. And I was struck by the fact that they were astrologers or astronomers.
- And I thought to myself, isn't there in the royal household an astronomer royal? There is. Still today. Still today. You might not know this, and I didn't, just a matter of incidental.
- Professor Michelle Doherty. I think she's the first female royal astronomer. And do you know how much she gets for being the royal astronomer? 100 pounds a year.
- Do you want that job? 100 pounds a year. So it's an honorary, it's an honorary role, isn't it? But you get to be a member of the royal family for a while. That's really good, isn't it? I think I like that job.
- [14 : 31] Only problem is, I don't know how to be an astronomer. Never mind. Okay, so here they are. And then the wise men, they, you know, we know them in certain ways, like we've got some strange traditions about them.
- Do you know what their names were, for example? Well, you will from tradition. Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar. I think he liked wine, did he? Is that right? One of those.
- Champagne bottles, is he? He must have been a champagne guy, I guess. Of course, the reality is the Bible doesn't give us their names. They first kind of were mentioned by name in the 6th century AD, and almost certainly it was a tradition.
- And they each represented apparently different countries. India, Persia, and Arabia even suggested. They were from the East, that's all we know. And we think there are three because there are three gifts.
- And that's the only reason we think there are three. But actually, we don't know how many there were. So we don't know their names. We don't know how many of them there were. And almost certainly, they would travel in a big crowd.
- [15 : 43] So there'd be a big crowd of them. There could have been more because they might have kind of, you know, put in together a kind of Secret Santa way to give their gifts because the gifts were very expensive gifts.
- And they came to the child. And very often, when you've got a nativity scene, like the one we've got in the room there, you see the king's worship in the baby Jesus. Although this is highly unlikely that he was a baby at this time.
- Partly because of the distance they traveled. And actually because when Herod decided to massacre the children, he massacred them, the boys, under two years of age.

Now that is probably significant. So Jesus, this time, was probably a toddler and not a baby. It wasn't just after he was born, all right? And it also says that they visited him in a house.

He wasn't in a stable. But you see how all of these myths develop over time and it's lovely to think of them worshiping a baby and all of that, but that probably wasn't the case, all right?

[16 : 46] Nonetheless, it was an astonishing moment. But what is even more interesting, I think, in the detail and something we often don't think about is how did they know that the star was significant and how did they know that the one who was to be born was king of the Jews?

They were not Jewish. So how did they know? We're not told that they were told this in a dream either. And so the likelihood is they were very familiar with Jewish scriptures.

They were, after all, wise men. They would get all kinds of wisdom literature sent to them or they would inherit it. And they were probably in the tradition of Daniel too. So they would know the prophecies of Daniel.

And they seem to have known the prophecy of Micah. Sorry, not prophecy of Micah. I've come to that. The prophecy of Balaam.

In Numbers chapter 24, verse 17, which says, I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall arise out of Israel.

[17 : 58] One who is to be born, a star that would guide them there, who carries a scepter like a king. The one who is to be born was king of the Jews.

Now, you don't often think about that, do you? But the fact that they had prior knowledge of this event and were looking forward to it was stimulated in their minds by the star in the sky.

Now, there's lots of speculation about whether the star was in the lining of two planets at a particular time, producing an unusual star in the sky. All I would point out there is the scripture calls it his star, as if it was uniquely created for this moment.

But these are incidentals, as interesting as they are, but the real point that we need to draw out is they came to worship him. They sought and followed God's guidance and their journey led them to this child, Jesus, whom they worshipped and they saw that he was the king of the Jews and the savior of the world.

These were wise men who weren't too wise to learn new truths and to have their thinking changed by the events that they saw all around them.

[19 : 22] Now, there are some very clever people in the world who tell us to be open-minded all of the while when they're entirely closed to the possibility of the existence of God. It's quite interesting, isn't it?

They'll tell you how wise they are and how learned and how they depend on science, and yet they won't acknowledge that science cannot tell you whether there's a God or not. But then they dismiss the very possibility of it all while Paul says God is revealing himself to them in the events that happen in human history.

And here is a key event, the key event in human history that some wise men at least were open-minded enough to consider. Many miracles are taking place here.

A child is born to a virgin. That only happens if there's a miracle. You might need a biological lesson if you don't believe that. Okay.

Babies are not born this way. This is a miracle. Angels speak from heaven. This is a miracle. It doesn't happen every day. Angels turn up and tell you not to be afraid.

[20 : 37] Kings are led by God to travel hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles to worship at the feet of a child called Jesus.

This is miraculous. To accept that, you have to view it with the eyes of faith. Yes. But you have to open your mind to the possibility that this could happen.

If you dismiss it out of hand, you will never truly worship at the feet of King Jesus. And when you think about this, their openness to the following of God's guidance and their willingness to completely change their life and their outlook as a result.

You think of the many examples in the New Testament, but I picked out one, that of Zacchaeus and his favorite. You remember when Zacchaeus met Jesus, when he encountered Jesus, he'd gone up that tree and then he was called to come down and Jesus invited himself to his house and then he heard the message of Jesus and he said, Lord, I'm going to change from this moment on and I'm going to give back whatever I've defrauded from people and I'm going to give it back in abundance.

I want to be a different man. And here is the point. When we truly worship at the feet of Jesus, when we truly encounter Jesus, our lives can never be the same again.

[22 : 03] And we open ourselves up to become servants who are ready to give to him the very treasures that we possess. And so secondly, the thing we want to learn from this passage is the contrast between believing and unbelieving responses.

There are sharp contrasts drawn here, particularly between the wise men and King Herod and the religious leaders. the wise men wanted to know where this baby was to be born.

And so understandably, they thought, who will know where a king is going to be born? They had the vision of a king being born. So where would you go to find out where a king is going to be born?

You'd go to see a king. You'd go to a palace. Surely a king would know because kings know everything. And so they go to King Herod in Jerusalem and they ask him, where is this baby to be born?

The king of the Jews and Herod, who is not a very nice fellow, although history knows him as Herod the Great, more about that in a moment, he's disturbed.

[23 : 12] He's terrified, in fact, and all Jerusalem with him, which is an odd thing to say, isn't it? Why is all Jerusalem afraid as well? Because if a king's afraid, everybody needs to be afraid.

It's like that old saying about the economy. If America sneezes, the whole world catches a cold. Yeah? If Herod's afraid, he might take it out on the people.

He'll go looking for the king. He himself would expect the king, perhaps, to be born in Jerusalem so that he might get a knock on the door and your child might be snatched away. Everybody's afraid.

So the news gets out. These strangers are visiting. Where is this king to be born? And Herod is interested, but Herod the Great.

That's how he's known in history. He was given that name by Josephus, the Jewish historian. And he was great because he built things, like he built the second temple, or he refurbished it at least.

[24 : 10] He built the port at Caesarea and made that much nicer for the Romans. He also built the fortress of Masada. And you can still see the Wailing Wall or the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

He built that wall too. So he was a great builder. He was also a very clever politician. The Romans particularly liked him. He was in the line of the Herodians.

Did you notice lots of Herods, just like there are lots of pharaohs, because Herod was their title. And then they would have other names, like Antipas and Agrippa and so on.

Herod the Great, he just got the great. Magnus, the Magnificent. Yeah? He obviously thought a lot of himself. And Herod the Great was also ruthless.

He disturbed an awful lot of people enough to send them into exile, including Jesus and his family, into Egypt. He also was willing to massacre 2,000 infants.

[25 : 07] That's how ruthless he was. He might be great in terms of his building, but he's a nasty piece of works in terms of his ruling. And so he asks for the religious leaders to turn out and to give an answer to the question, where is the one to be born?

And they come up with a 700-year-old prophecy from Micah, Micah chapter 5 and verse 2. 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.

And so he gets his answer. Where is the one to be born? Bethlehem. What do the wise men do? We're off to Bethlehem. See ya. What do the religious leaders do?

Nothing. Again, we seldom think about this. They're supposed to be waiting for their Messiah. They're supposed to be really excited about God's intervention in the world.

What do they do? Nothing. Because they're indifferent to this Jesus. It's like in this country, everybody celebrates Christmas, not many people worship Jesus.

[26 : 17] That's the difference, you see. They go to worship, whereas the religious leaders decide to sit on their backsides back home because they don't care.

As long as it doesn't disturb their lifestyle and interfere too much with their lives. Jesus is not for life, just for Christmas, for so many.

What does Herod do? Well, he's not indifferent. He's full of hate. He wants to eradicate Jesus.

He wants to get Christ out of Christmas. And it's representative, isn't it, of many attitudes, many modern attitudes that still exist when it comes to this child, Jesus.

Some people are indifferent to him, other people worship him, other people hate him. And want to eradicate his influence from our very society.

[27 : 18] But when they come to find him, they are filled with exceeding great joy. And you know, my favorite story in the whole of this kind of activity is that of Simeon.

You remember all Simeon when he is, it tells us in the scripture that he was at the temple day and night, there to wait upon the Christ child because he was given a revelation by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord Jesus Christ come, the Messiah.

What a thing to be given. Imagine Simeon going around and saying, by the way, an angel has told me that I am not going to die until I see the Christ child. Can you imagine what his friends, well, Simeon must have had a bit too much wine.

But it was true. And then it says these lovely words, moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple court. There's Simeon, he's just, it's an everyday thing.

And then something in him says, you need to go into the temple court, Simeon. So in he goes. And by the way, have you noticed his openness to the Spirit? He's a person who the Spirit speaks to and he hears, he's a Spirit, he's a person who the Spirit motivates and moves and he moves.

[28 : 37] We need to keep in step with the Spirit. We need to be moved by the Spirit like Simeon. Moved by the Spirit, he went to the temple court when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the customs of the law required.

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you've prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that is spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and the sword will pierce your soul also.

Mary, you've got such joy that it's going to hurt you terribly. Mary, the world is going to rejoice for a while at your child and then you're going to watch him die and it's going to break your heart.

How amazing. How moving. but the joy and the peace of Simeon as he worshipped and held the Christ child in his arms and he said, I'm happy to die now.

[30 : 03] I'm happy to die now. You ever contemplated your dying? You ever think about that? The Puritans used to say that Christians should spend time contemplating their dying, anticipating it and praying for a good death.

and you can only have a good death if you are filled with faith in the God who holds your life and death in his hands. If you follow the one who says, I am the resurrection of life, you're not going to die.

Because I live, you will live also. He said, I am prepared to go in peace, happy to die now because my life is fulfilled in this moment.

And so it was with the wise men as they worshipped at the feet of Jesus they had a joy and inner gladness, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

So remember the contrasts. The wise men's joy and adoration as opposed to Herod's fear born out of insecurity.

[31 : 10] The wise men's eagerness to find King Jesus as opposed to the religious rulers utter indifference to Him. And in this room today, we have those contrasts, do we not?

Some of you are filled with exceeding great joy and others of you are indifferent. And you need to examine your heart as I need to examine mine.

If I imagine myself at the feet of this child, would I be on my knees in worship or would I be indifferent at best and hostile at worst?

Which is it? Where are you? Do you have this Christmas joy or is it an indifference? What can I give Him, the old carol says, poor as I am.

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what I can, I give Him. And what is it?

[32 : 22] Give Him my heart. Are you going to give Jesus your heart? Or are you going to wave Him away in your indifference?

And then thirdly, there is an example here of worship, sacrifice, and obedience to the King. When they came to worship, they gave Him three gifts. The gifts are significant. They gave Him gold, incense, or frankincense, and myrrh.

And of course, you give gold to a king. You give incense to a priest because it's used as a symbol of prayer in the temple.

And as the incense rises, it's like prayer that rises to God. And you give myrrh to prepare a person for their burial because the myrrh was used to embalm the dead body and to keep away the decay.

And when you think about these gifts, gold is one of the most valuable of all gifts. You give gold medals to Olympic winners. You give gold rings to your bride or your bridegroom if you do give rings at all.

[33 : 31] You give a gold crown to a king. And when the wise men came to worship Jesus, they give the most precious thing they could provide that cost them the most, gold.

Gold fitting for this king of kings. And this reminds us that if we truly worship Jesus, we want to give him our best.

And that which is most precious to us. Now that which is most precious to us cannot be measured in terms of wealth. The Bible demands not our wealth.

Jesus demands not our money. He asks for our lives. Our hearts. To give him away our life so that we may gain our life.

To not hold on to our life and lose our soul. Jesus wants us. He wants all of us. And not just a part.

[34 : 34] To give him our hearts. And then the frankincense or the incense used by priests in worship, he's saying to him, give me your prayer. And when you give him your prayer, what are you doing?

You're giving him your trust. Because you're trusting him every day. You're asking for him in the midst of uncertainty and all the dreariness and darkness and difficulties of life.

You give him your trust and every day you pray to him, Lord, I am bringing to you all that is precious to me as well. You know what is precious to me? My wife, my husband, my children, their well-being, their difficulties, my struggles, the hardships of life.

I bring them all to you. I give you my incense. I give you my prayer. I every day raise it before you. And in the act of praying, there is a confession of an act of helplessness.

What I cannot do, what I worry about every day, what causes me distress and stress and difficulties, I bring to you. I sit at your feet in worship and I say, Jesus, I can't.

[35 : 45] You can. Jesus, I worry, but you tell me not to worry. Jesus, I struggle, but you tell me to give it to you. You say, cast all your care upon me because I care for you.

And then you give him your myrrh. That is, you give him your life and you take up your cross and you say, for you, Jesus, I am willing to die if that's what it takes.

I am willing to give up the independent exercise of my own sovereignty over my own life. I am prepared to give it to you, Jesus.

In worship, I give you my life. The point is, true worship always requires a response of that magnitude.

True worship is surrender. all that I am, all that I have, all that I will be, Jesus, I surrender to you.

[36 : 56] I worship. That's what wise people do. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Jesus, what is the most important thing to you? Or who is the most important person to you?

Jesus. Jesus. Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorned its shame, and now sits down at the right hand of God, who gave everything for you at the cross, so that you could give your all for him.

And so, as we close today, let us remember like the wise men, we need to act upon our understanding of God's word. What is he saying to you?

What are you hearing from him? What is he prompting you to do? How are you going to act upon that? We need to respond to the light that Christ has given to us.

[38 : 16] In one sense, his star is always shining in the world. Light has come. Follow that light. We need to worship him with genuine joy and sacrificial giving.

What can I give him? Here, I give my all. I give my heart. And then we allow our encounter with Jesus to lead us on a transformed path of obedience to the call of God upon our lives.

When the Magi were about to go back to Herod, they had a dream. And the dream warned them not to go back, not to trust that king.

but now that they had trusted the king of kings to go home a different way because their lives would never be the same again. When you encounter Jesus, your life is never the same again.

Amen. Amen.