

They came, they saw, they worshipped

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[0 : 00] Now, if you could have your Bibles open at Matthew 2, please, and we'll have a moment of prayer together.

In God our Father, I pray that you will take my human words, in all their weakness and imperfection, and you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I've no doubt at all that Herod the King, of verse 1 of this chapter, would be delighted were he to know that 2,000 years after his reign, his name was remembered. Indeed, it was read publicly, and it was known to many people.

He would equally have been horrified that he realized the reason why his name was going to be remembered. Herod the Great, as he's called by the historians, apart from those few people who are interested in ancient history, is remembered not for his virtues, where he had very few of those, not for his prowess.

He is remembered exclusively because he came into contact with the one who was born, King of the Jews. And that's how Matthew begins his Gospel. Everything is turned upside down.

[1 : 40] Herod the King is to be confronted by a greater King. Wise men, as we've sung, find one wiser than they knew.

And this whole Gospel is overturning then, as it's overturning now, all our assumptions. Now, Matthew is often described as the most Jewish of the Gospels.

Now, there is some truth in that, but we must be careful, because the first people who come to worship the Jewish Messiah are not Jews in Matthew.

They are Gentiles. They are these wise men from the East. And the Gospel ends with the words, Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, right from the beginning.

This was never a local Jewish affair. This was the coming into the world of someone who was going to transform the world from top to bottom. It's interesting as well how Matthew begins.

[2 : 43] What I like about the New Testament, said the man, is it's not like the Old Testament. It doesn't have long lists of names. Look at the page. How does Matthew begin?

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. And then it goes on for 17 remorseless verses with name after name after name.

It was just this passage that led to the conversion of a Chinese gentleman who said, A man with so many ancestors must be worth taking seriously. This is the living word of God.

Every part of it transforms. Man with so many ancestors. But that man who has so many ancestors is also the son of God, as the chapter goes on to say.

We're going to look at this story now for some moments. The visit of the wise men. It's a beautiful story. One of the most beautiful of all the stories we read at this time of year.

- [3 : 42] It's full of suspense. And full of unanswered questions. How little we know about these three wise men. We don't even know there were three wise men, do we?
- We talk about the three wise men. We don't know there were three. We don't know their names. We don't know where they came from. Apart from the east or the star when it rose, which could also, of course, be more familiarly translated.
- We've seen it in the east. They didn't even follow the star. They saw the star. And then when they left Jerusalem, they saw the star again as it hovered over Bethlehem.
- So let's go with them. Let's travel the journey with them over these next moments and see what this story is saying to us today. Because it's not just a beautiful story about the past.
- It's a story that's talking to us today. When Julius Caesar invaded Britain, he famously said, I came, I saw, I conquered. I'm going to adapt that phrase as the key into this story.
- [4 : 51] They came, they saw, and they worshipped. And indeed that's what verse 2 says. He was used. For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.
- So first of all, them. And we all know how they came, don't we? Because the Christmas cards tell us. They came on healthy looking camels.
- They were beautifully dressed. They were, there was nothing, there was nothing around them except very sanitized desert. A beautiful sky with the star shining in it.
- It has to be said, even that carol which we sang, very beautiful in many ways, as with joyful steps they sped, saviour to your lowly bed, that probably did not represent what happened most of the time.
- Listen to how T.S. Eliot describes it in the journey of the Magi. A cold coming we had of it. Just the worst time of the year for a journey.
- [5 : 50] And such a long journey. The ways deep and the weather sharp. The very dead of winter. That's more what it was like. They would come through snow.
- They would come through hail. They would come through dangerous places. Threatened by perhaps dangerous wildlife. Threatened perhaps by bandits and so on.
- And at the end of that poem, Eliot makes one of the wise men say, And the ringing in our ears, saying this was all folly. Have you ever felt like that?
- If you're like me, you'll feel like that often. We're hopeful, we believe it. But so often, voices sing in our ears, saying this was all folly. Is it worth it? Can I build my life on it?
- So they came. Who was it? Wise men, we are told, or Magi? The kind of people you read about in some of the later Old Testament books, like Daniel and Esther.
- [6 : 48] Those kind of people at the courts of the monarchs, who were his advisors, often studying astronomy, astrology, and the occult. Now such people would include charlatans, obviously.
- But they would also include honest seekers after the truth, like those men. Those men were people who were searching. Now if you go into any of the big bookshops, like Borders or Waterstones, you will find evidence that people are searching for answers.
- You go to the mind, body, and spirit section. Now of course there's a great deal of nonsense in those sections, a great deal of dangerous nonsense. Nevertheless, they are evidence that people are asking questions.
- People are asking questions about the meaning of life. People are asking questions about the universe. People are asking questions about our origin. There is a spiritual hunger in our world, as there was with those wise men.
- And so often we obscure the light. So often we don't shine the light into that darkness. So often we leave the way open for the charlatans who fill the mind, body, and spirit section of the bookshops instead of shining the light into the darkness.

[8 : 11] We would love to know what influences were on those wise men. They were possibly in touch with some of the people of God. After the exile, only a few of the people of God returned to Jerusalem.

Many people remained in the eastern lands, in Babylonia and Persia. Read about such people in Esther. And possibly had even read some of the writings.

We don't know. All we know is that they were seeking that God led them. They are first called kings in the second century AD.

They're not called kings at all. Probably under the influence of the passage I read from Isaiah a few moments ago. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

It's the end of the sixth century before they're christened Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. A whole range of legends have grown up, including the Armenian church that they were the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who were miraculously raised to life to see the child and then to die again.

[9 : 22] Now all these are legends. Some of them are very interesting, even moving stories. The basic point is that they are wise in the biblical sense.

They came searching for the king, just as King Herod is to prove himself to be a fool in the biblical sense. Where did they come from?

We are told they came from the east. One of the carols speaks about Persian lands afar, possibly Babylon. Certainly they journeyed for about 18 months.

We know that from later in the chapter when Herod, in verse 16, sent all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and under.

Once again, the carols mislead us, don't they? The shepherds leave the stable by one door and the wise men come in by another. The wise men did not come to the stable.

[10 : 26] The family had moved to a house by this time. And probably Jesus is something like 18 months old by this time. They're probably a large group of people.

It's unlikely that three men would take such a long and dangerous journey without some kind of entourage. Probably they had letters of introduction to King Herod.

This was more or less a kind of official party. But the real agenda is in verse 2. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.

So through the story runs a contrast. They came and they came at great risk. Whereas Herod and his advisors stayed put and did nothing.

You know, that's still the case today. Many people know the scriptures in some sense. They know the gospel. And like Herod and his advisors, they do nothing at all about it.

[11 : 30] We'll come back to that. That's the first thing then. They came and it was a cold coming. A dangerous journey. A long journey. Lasting many months. With an uncertain outcome.

And an uncertain ending. The second thing about them is that they saw. And in particular they saw two things. We saw his star, first of all.

Now what was the star of Bethlehem? And once again there's a multitude of stories about it. No one knows what the star of Bethlehem was.

Or rather lots of people know, but they don't agree with each other. Which reminds me of the same thing when you think of it. We are told it was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, perhaps.

Perhaps it was Halley's comet. Perhaps a supernova. All these kind of astronomical descriptions. And it has to be said, some commentators who don't know what to say about the passage fill the pages with astronomy, which in no way helps us into the heart of the story.

- [12 : 39] The point of the star of Bethlehem is surely very different from deciding astronomically and scientifically what it was. Surely the point is that what is happening here is something of utterly cosmic significance.

This is not a little local incident in Bethlehem. This is something that affects the whole of creation. You know, we so often domesticate Christmas, don't we, into a pretty story for the Bethlehem Herald.

Shepherds in the fields abiding. Wise men in their beautifully dressed camels. We so parochialize the story. We make it as if it were something for a local newspaper.

It is said when the Titanic went down that the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported the event under the headline, Aberdeen Woman Lost at Sea. And that is the way we often treat the Christmas story.

A pregnant woman gives birth in Bethlehem. And that's it. Pretty little story, but not to be taken too seriously. You see what's being said here.

- [13 : 50] A star appears in the east. A star rises, which is no ordinary star. Because this child is not only king of the Jews.

Not even king of the world. Only this child is the king of the whole universe. This is the Lord of creation. The Lord of history. Who is coming into his creation.

That's how big, how staggering, how world-changing the Christmas story is. The Lord who made heaven and earth comes down into his creation.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain. Heaven and earth will flee away when he comes to reign. In the bleak midwinter, a stable place suffice.

The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ. And Matthew tells us later on in his gospel, and we sang about this in our first hymn, when he comes again, the stars and the heavenly bodies will shake.

- [14 : 52] There will be signs in the heavens. And the book of Numbers tells us, a star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel.

See what's happening here. All the prophecies, all the signs, all the intimations, if you like, in the Old Testament are coming together. The hopes and fears of all the years are meeting in Bethlehem.

And then again in verse 9, After listening to the king, they went on their way, and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy, which suggests that they did not actually follow the star. They saw the star that led them to the journey, that led them to Jerusalem, that led them to their inquiries, and then they make their way to Bethlehem.

And as if to confirm the leading, the star appears then. It doesn't necessarily mean the star hovered above the actual building, because obviously there are many things we don't know about this story.

- [16 : 06] A few the street inquiries could have told the wise men what they wanted to know. So what I'm saying is, this star was a real phenomenon that appeared in the heavens. But to try to explain it astronomically really explains nothing, because the point is, God is sending this special star to show that this special event is about to happen.

That's the first thing they saw. But then in verse 11, and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother. They didn't say, oh, isn't he cute?

That was not their reaction. Their reaction is astonishing. They fell down and worshipped him. Notice it doesn't say they fell down and worshipped them.

They did not worship Mary. They worshipped her child. They worshipped him. We'll come to that in a moment. When they, notice verse 10, when they saw the star, they rejoiced.

When they saw the star, in other words, they were glad that their journey had been confirmed. God, in his grace, was showing them that they had come to the right place.

[17:18] And then in the next verse, when they saw the child. It's very different. You see, the star was simply the guide. The star was simply the pointer. They didn't bow down and worship the star.

And remember, of course, they come from an area and from a culture where star worship was common. I mean, throughout the ancient world, the world of the Bible, the worship of the heavenly bodies was at the very heart of their religion.

They don't worship the star. They worship the child. So they came, they saw, and they worshipped. So let's look at that then. That's why they came, isn't it?

We have seen his star and have come to worship him. Now, they didn't have full light at the beginning. At the very beginning of the story, they were going out into an unknown country, an unknown journey, without exactly knowing what they would find.

But now, they see something that transforms them. It's interesting that Matthew is going to use this word worship in his gospel in two other significant places.

[18:32] By the way, when you're studying the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, it's important to see they fit in with the whole picture in the gospel. Not just a beautiful story tagged on at the beginning as an introduction to the main meat of the story.

Matthew, right from the beginning, is telling us what the significance of his gospel is. In Matthew 14, verse 30, when Jesus stills the storm, we're told that his disciples worshipped him.

In other words, they realized that this was the one who was to come. This was the one for whom they had been looking. And then again, in 28, verse 9, when they see the risen Lord, they worship him.

Fascinating, actually, if you read that whole verse, it says, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Just rather, it's, in this world, we walk by faith.

We never have complete certainty. And worship and doubting can so often go together in our hearts. We want to believe, but we find it difficult.

[19:38] And yet, we worship. So that's the first thing. But what does it mean to worship? This is one of those words that's used, and so often used, vaguely.

Well, let's look a little at what this passage tells us about exactly what the wise men did. First of all, they heard, and they obeyed his word.

Look at verse 5. They told him, that's the teachers, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, and you, O Bethlehem, the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

That's actually referring to two passages in the Old Testament, to the passage in Micah, which we looked at some weeks ago in our Christmas series, the passage that tells us that the Messiah, the prince, will come from Bethlehem, but it also refers to 2 Samuel 5, verse 2, where David is described as the shepherd of my people Israel.

Now, you can see how important that is. everything that has happened in the Old Testament story, everything surrounding the great story of David and his little town of Bethlehem, this is now being fulfilled.

[21 : 03] Now, you can see the contrast here, though. Verse 4, assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

Now, these men already knew these passages. It wasn't news to them that Micah and 2 Samuel had spoken of the one who was to come, who was to be a ruler and a shepherd of my people Israel.

They didn't change their lives. They knew the facts, and we must remember that the letter of James tells us that the devil believes and trembles. Theology of hell is totally orthodox, but it's not the kind of knowledge that leads to transformation and to saving faith.

True worship always flows, not just from knowing God's word in the sense of knowing it theoretically, but from listening to it and obeying it. I think that's so important nowadays, and there's so much confused talk and thinking about worship.

Worship is often seen as what we offer to God. Well, that in one sense is true, but it's a secondary truth. We would have nothing at all to say to God unless he first spoke to us.

[22 : 20] So in order to worship properly, we need to listen to God's word, we need to obey God's word. And when the wise men worshipped, that's exactly what they did. So that was part of their worship.

They heard the word of God, and they obeyed it. But secondly, they gave gifts. Well-known words in verse 11, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Now this is not salvation by works. They weren't buying their way into the king's favor. They were simply responding. Now, from a very early stage, these gifts were seen as having symbolic significance.

This is reflected in many of the carols. Gold symbolizing the king, frankincense symbolizing God to whom offerings were given, and myrrh referring to his death.

Now, this is an important principle of biblical interpretation. Almost certainly, the wise men would not bring gifts for that reason. They would not be aware of the whole significance of what they were doing.

[23 : 35] These were literal gifts. These were suitable gifts to bring to the one they were coming to see. That doesn't mean, of course, that Matthew didn't see that significance, or that we can't see it.

So often in scripture, there are details which are literal details. They also open a window onto something greater and something bigger. on a very practical level, almost certainly those gifts would finance the trip to Egypt, the hurried trip to Egypt, and they stay there.

And doesn't that show, of course, how rooted the gospel is, both in this world and in the world to come? It's never a case of simply the one or the other.

The gospel comes right down into our world, and it uses what it finds in our world. And that's why it is such a profound and life-changing experience.

You see, you get many so-called gospels, they're simply theoretical, all up in the air, theories, philosophies, ideas, which sound great, but we don't actually cash out in everyday living.

[24 : 45] You get other so-called gospels that are purely this worldly, dealing with material matters. the gospel deals with both the seen and the unseen worlds.

When God comes into our world, he takes flesh, and by taking flesh, he comes right into our experience, into our circumstances.

I think that's illustrated by the gifts. The significance, of course, the deeper significance, we can see it, and we can rejoice in it. Nevertheless, we've got to remember the sheer practicality of this as well.

A poor and a family with no resources are about to have to make a hurried journey to Egypt. How are they going to pay for this? And so the Lord prepares this.

And that's another aspect of our worship, isn't it? Worship is both seven whole days, not one in seven. I will praise you, as the Anglican boy George Herbert said.

[25 : 46] And C.S. Lewis says, if we worship God during six days of the week, the seventh will look after itself. There's a great deal of truth in that. We bring to God what we are, all that we are, just as I am.

We bring it to him, and he transforms it. So what did it mean to worship? It meant to listen, to obey God's word, it meant to give gifts, but secondly, thirdly rather, it meant that they were totally transformed.

And here once again is another phrase that has a literal meaning, but also a deeper meaning. verse 12, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This simple phrase, by another way, obviously is a literal phrase. They obviously avoided Jerusalem, perhaps going round the Dead Sea and striking northwest back to their own country, journey, but surely it also means that they went back changed people.

They were not the same people who had made the journey. They were seekers as they made the journey, they were searching, and God honored that, but as they returned, they were changed men.

[27 : 02] And T.S. Eliot says that in the journey of the magi, I would do it again. very simple words, but showing the transformation. And once again, they are sensitive to God's voice that warned in a dream, that obviously recalls Joseph's dream earlier in the story in chapter 1, when the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take Mary as his wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

And so they depart to their own country by another way, and they disappear from Scripture. Or do they? Every time I read that great verse in Revelation 7 14, and I saw a great multitude, whom no one could count, from every nation, tribe, and language, standing before God, and before the Lamb.

I always think, who can doubt, that among these are the unnamed strangers, who came from the east, to worship him who is born, King of the Jews.

They disappear from Scripture. Their names are unknown in Scripture, but undoubtedly written in heaven. And so they came that time, not to Bethlehem, but to heaven, seeing fully, rather than partially, and worshipping truly.

And as we leave them, let's leave them being and doing the kind of people they were. Let's not simply come, let's not just simply see, but let's truly worship, because that is what this great story is about.

[28 : 54] And it's my prayer that each of us, as we have listened to this story, will depart in a different way, as we have met and worshipped the child. Let's pray.

As we pray, I want to use the great prayer of the English reformer, Thomas Cranmer, which I've used once or twice in the last few weeks. Almighty God, give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, here in the time of this mortal life, when our Saviour came to visit us in great humility, so that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may be made like him in his eternal kingdom, where he lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.