

Matthew 2:1-12, 9.30 Epiphany

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of Jesus Christ; the time when God revealed his Son to the Magi, who were probably Gentiles somewhere from the east, the title 'Magi' means 'wise men'. God had already introduced Jesus to the Jews through the shepherds, and now it was time to introduce Jesus to the Gentiles.

Now we are told that the Magi were astrologers' men of wisdom and learning, they studied the stars, and they predicted the future from the stars, and probably many other things as well.

Now there is another name for such people in the Bible, they are referred to by St Paul as magicians or sorcerers, indeed the first 4 letters of Magi is the beginning of the word magician.

So, God in choosing Gentile Magi, to reveal his Son to the world was demonstrating that Jesus had come for everybody, even to those potentially opposed to him, nobody was to be outside of God's saving grace.

This is also a lesson for all of us when it comes to discrimination; because since God does not exclude anyone from his saving grace, then neither should we discriminate against people due to their race, gender, or religious differences.

In choosing the Gentile Magi, God was also demonstrating to the Jews that their monopoly of God had to stop, that he was for everyone not just the Jews, a lesson that many Jews had to learn including St Peter.

We are told that it was in Bethlehem that Jesus was born, as prophesied in the Old Testament book of Micah see chapter 5:2 where we read, "But you, O Bethlehem from you shall come forth for me one who will rule in Israel".

Not only was Jesus of the lineage of David he was born in the same city. It was also where David was anointed by Samuel to be king; 1 Samuel 16, and 17.

It was in Bethlehem that Jacob buried Rachael, Genesis 48 verse 7: it was in Bethlehem that they expected God's Anointed One to come into the world; and it happen just as it was prophesied.

Bethlehem was a sacred city to the Jews a thousand years before Jesus crowned it with glory.

We are also told in verse 1 that the wise men were guided to Jerusalem by a star, which being the capital city of the country would be where you would expect to find a king, but we know that he wasn't there, but in Bethlehem.

In verses 4 to 6 we read how king Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes together to pinpoint the exact spot where Jesus was born, which the wise men were unable to do.

Like the Jews, we as Christians have God as our base for wisdom, not science, however good we think science might be.

However, having said that it appears that it was the Gentiles who had to tell God's people that the Messiah had come; also, at the end of verse 2 we read that the magi, who interpreted the stars, had come to worship Jesus, the baby born to be king, so even they put God above science.

Now in verse 3 we read that when king Herod and the people of Jerusalem heard from the wise men that a child had been born to be the king of Israel, that king Herod was frightened and inconsequence all Jerusalem with him."

Now if the news of the birth of Jesus had been brought by anyone else other than the wise men, Herod would have probably shrugged it off as nonsense.

But Herod, knew the reputation of the wise men, and he feared for his throne, and his fear spread to all those around him.

We know that Herod feared for his throne because of the cruel way he tried to destroy Jesus, by killing all the male children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem.

Herod was appointed governor in 47 BC by the Romans, and in 40 BC was given the title of king; he died in 4 BC.

He was called Herod the great probably because he reigned for about 36 years as a king, and he was the first of the four Herod's to rule in Israel.

Herod built massive public buildings including the Temple in Jerusalem, which was recognised as one of the finest buildings in the whole of the middle east.

Many great dictators start off with good works and good intentions, but eventually greed and the joy of absolute power corrupt them, and they become evil, which sadly is what happened to king Herod.

King Herod had one great fault, which got worse as he got older; he was insanely suspicious that everyone was trying to take the throne away from him, which is also reminiscent of some dictators in the 20th century.

He became a murderous old man having his wife and several of his sons assassinated to keep his throne to himself.

That's why the people of Jerusalem were frightened, not of the talk about the birth of a child born to be king, but of what Herod would do in retaliation of his throne being threatened, even by a baby.

And in the event, they were justified in their fear, because he had all the male children under two killed in Bethlehem to try and kill Jesus, who had already been taken to Egypt by his parents following a message from God to Joseph in a dream.

Now from our reading while the star that had brought the wise men as far as Jerusalem, it wasn't accurate enough to lead them precisely to the child, because they had to ask in Jerusalem where Jesus was likely to have been born.

It was because they asked questions about where Jesus was likely to have been born that Herod got to know about it.

And it was king Herod who summoned his chief priests and scribes together who pinpointed Jesus' birthplace, namely in Bethlehem as prophesied by Micah.

But what Herod still didn't know was when he was born, for that he had to ask the wise men when they first saw the star.

Now since king Herod had all the children killed, who were up to two years old, it is very possible that Jesus might not have been a new born baby when the wise men eventually arrived and visited him, but more likely to have been a one to two year old toddler, indeed verse 13 refers to Jesus as a child not as a baby.

We are told that the wise men brought Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, and presented it to Jesus.

Now there may be different opinions as to why they gave those three things to Jesus, but from a purely practical point of view the Gold must have come in especially useful to Joseph and Mary, who were about to take an expensive trip to Egypt to protect their son from Herod.

The gold would have paid for the journey, for some lodgings on the way and for lodgings when they got there and tied them over until Joseph managed to get a job.

And it was probably just after the visit that he was taken directly to Egypt for safety, and when Herod died in 4 BC an angel of the Lord again appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel." But they didn't return to Bethlehem but to Nazareth.

But the story for me isn't only about times and dates, or about Herod, it's more about the wise men that were searching for Jesus and being overwhelmed with joy at finding him.

While most people in this country today do not think it wise to seek the Lord; nevertheless, we who do seek him as a friend and saviour are wise, indeed we are as wise as the wise men in our Bible story, who did seek him and find him.

Now the fact is that we have all searched for Jesus and have either found him or are in the process of finding him, otherwise we wouldn't be here worshipping God today.

But has our experience in searching and in finding Jesus been, and does it continue to be, like the wise men, and the shepherds, one of great joy?

I was recently trying to decide where my joy in Christ came from, and on reflection I decided that my joy is not dependant on external things, although knowing fellow Christians and others is a joy, but my real joy is in knowing that I have a personal relationship with Jesus, that I'm saved to Christ, and that Jesus loves me and wants me as a brother and friend.

Our joy is in our personal relationship with our Lord which we have through personal and corporate prayer, and through the certain knowledge that he is with us wherever we go, which means that there is nowhere we can go, where we are alone and cannot turn to him for help, or just to talk to him or share our joy with him.

And here is a true saying; "There is nothing we can say do or be that will make God love us more, than he loves us at the moment"

And that's worth repeating; so, I say again, "There is nothing we can say do or be that will make God love us more, than he loves us at the moment". So, no matter where we are, we can love the Lord for his own sake, as he loves us for our own sake.

The wise men looked into the eyes of a little boy, and saw infinite love, and the very image of God; that's why they, and the shepherds, were overwhelmed with great Joy.

let us pray.

Grant us gracious Lord that we may love and seek you always and everywhere. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for all the benefits which you won for us while suffering on the cross; for all the pain and insults which you bore for us in your love for us.

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother help us to get to know you more clearly and to follow you more closely Day by day. We ask this for your dear name's sake.

Amen.