

Matthew 2:1 to 12 8.0 am.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit  
Amen.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel starts with the words, "In the time of king Herod." This was Herod the great who reigned from 37 BCE to 4 BCE which means that Jesus was born in Bethlehem sometime during or before 4 BCE.

We are told in the second part of verse 1 that, "Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking. 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"

The wise men from the East in many Bibles are called Magi and they were Gentiles, so, this morning we are slightly confusingly talking about the Epiphany, that is, the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles.

God had already introduced Jesus to the Jews when an angel invited the shepherds to go and see Jesus lying in a manger in a stable.

Now there is another name for Magi 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 wise men to reveal his Son to us was demonstrating that Jesus had come for everybody, even to the magicians and sorcerers, 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 that 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.

The last part of verse 2 reads, "We have come to pay him homage." So, although the wise men are principally men of science nevertheless, they had come to worship Jesus a clear indication that even they put God above science.

"When king Herod heard this, he was frightened, and in consequence all Jerusalem with him."

Herod was paranoid about losing his throne. He had many of his family members, including his wife, sons, and close associates executed, because he saw them as a threat to his throne, and after he got to know about the birth of Jesus had all the boys of Bethlehem of 2 years or younger killed, referred to as, 'the massacre of the 'innocence.'

As for the people of Jerusalem they were frightened because they didn't know how Herod was going to react at the news of a usurper to his throne.

In verses 4 we read how king Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes together and asked them where Jesus may have been born.

The religious leaders would have pointed Herod to the prophesy in the Old Testament book of Micah chapter 5 verse 2 which reads, "But you, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

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.

“Then Herod secretly called the wise men and learned from them exactly what time the star appeared” Herod is concerned about the exact time because that information will help him to estimate Jesus’ age and narrow down the search.

Then Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem, and said, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word, so that I also may go and pay him homage.”

Herod decides to send the wise men to find the child rather than sending his troops to Bethlehem, which might alert the people and allow the family and child to escape, so he involves the unsuspecting wise men in his treachery.

But it is not homage that Herod has in mind but murder, because as we know Herod thinks the child poses a danger to his throne.

Bethlehem is only about five miles from Jerusalem, so it would not be difficult for the wise men to find it, but they still need the star to pinpoint the exact building where the baby and the family are.

It also seems that while the star can be seen by the wise men and interpreted by them to be a star to be followed, that is not the case for other people who do not pay any significance to it, in effect it is invisible to other people.

The last section of verse 9 reads, “Until it stopped over the place where the child was.” “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

What a contrast between the joy of these Gentiles and the fear of Herod and the Jews in Jerusalem.

The Jews, the very people who have been waiting for their Messiah, and who should be ready to receive Christ with great joy, are instead afraid, while the Gentiles, those least likely to care anything about a Jewish Messiah, receive him with overwhelming joy.

During his ministry, Jesus will turn many assumptions upside down, and it seems he begins his work at a very early age.

In verse 11 we have, “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother.” The wise men find Jesus in a house.

Matthew’s reference to a house differs from the stable where one would find a manger as in St Luke’s version of Jesus’ birth story. There are at least two possible explanations.

Firstly, it is possible that the manger area where Jesus was born was part of a house, which is quite common in many countries even today.

Secondly, we are told, “On entering the house they saw a child,” so for me it is more likely that Jesus was by now a toddler of up to 2 years old, and Mary and her family would be living in a house like normal people.

This second possibility is also supported by king Herod who kills all the children of Bethlehem who are up to 2 years old, and he wouldn’t have done that if he were looking for a newborn baby.

On seeing Jesus, they knelt down and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts that will be essential to Mary and Joseph if they are to travel to Egypt at very short notice.

Then God warned the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went home by another way.

And Herod's efforts to kill Jesus will prove futile because God will also warn Joseph, who will flee to Egypt with his family.

And it was probably just after the visit of the wise men that the family left.

When Herod died in 4 BCE an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel." And the family went and stayed in 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.

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 thinking about my joy as a Christian, and on reflection I realised that while it was knowing Jesus and his love for me as a brother, friend and saviour, my greatest joy is the journey of faith which I take with him every day.

Our joy is in our daily personal relationship with our Lord which we have through 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.

And here is a fact which we should remember no matter what our circumstances; "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 because they had found the Lord the Son of God.

let us pray.

Grant us gracious Lord that we may love and seek you always and everywhere. 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.