
Men Bearing Gifts

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 7 January 2024

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Ephesians 3:1-12 • Matthew 2:1-12



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We continue with our familiar Christmas story. Today we hear about the Magi, often called the Wise Men. These men, perhaps kings, perhaps astrologers, came and worshipped the Christ child at some time after his birth. It may have taken them a long while to travel to Bethlehem, if they came from far away; and Matthew doesn't give an exact timeline. It likely wouldn't have been just a day or two after Mary gave birth, and it might have been a year or two later. But the timeline isn't important, nor is the exact identity of these travellers, or whether there were two or three or four.

What is important is that Jesus was recognised and worshipped as a king by people high and low. Shepherds were among the lowest members of society, although their work was important; but they tended to be dirty and smelly and

to live rough, so their society was not sought. And the Wise Men were wealthy and likely high-born, judging from the very expensive and valuable gifts they brought. So both high and low worshipped the new-born king.

This is a good and significant way for Jesus to begin his time on earth. It underscores the fact that Jesus came for all of us, rich or poor, educated or not, high- or low-born. The Gospel is not just for those who live in palaces; it is for all people of whatever station or circumstances. Jesus came to teach us all how to live in harmony and Communion with him, and his teaching has no prerequisites, except an open heart and a willingness to believe. Jesus, although in truth a king, lived as a poor man among poor people; but he spoke to all who would listen. The stories in the Bible of his ministry speak of what we might call middle-class or wealthy people listening to him, and some joined him, along with the common labourers and peasants. All were welcome — all who had ears to hear were invited to listen! Jesus' message is easily understood by all who hear: God is love and wants all his people to live in his care.

The Feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrate today (its actual date is 6 January, but we're allowed to move it to the nearest Sunday) was originally a celebration of the Baptism of Christ, and it continues to be so in the Eastern Orthodox Church. As such, it ranks with Christmas and Easter as a major festival. Here in the West, it has become a celebration of the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus. We can celebrate the Baptism of Christ this weekend too, if we wish.

This brings up another important point: the Magi came from distant lands; they were not Jews. So their worship of Jesus foreshadows Jesus' own mission to Gentiles. He came to the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the wise and foolish, and the Jewish — or not. God clearly guided the Magi toward the stable by putting that bright star in the sky, and why bring them there unless Jesus was going to be their king too? Being astrologers and men of their time, they recognise the portent of the star and the importance of its placement at that time, that season, and that part of the sky. These men would have been among the first to spread the news of who Jesus was, when they went back to their own countries, after deceiving Herod and taking a different route home.

All of these celebrations are important milestones in Jesus' life on earth. His birth on Christmas Day marks the miraculous incarnation of God as a human being. The appearance of the angels to the shepherds and their visit to the stable shows that Jesus will be a man for all the people, even the lowliest. Mary and Joseph's visit to the temple for purification, and their encounter with Simeon and Anna, confirm Gabriel's news to Mary that Jesus will be the Messiah, for whom the Jews have long been waiting. The visit of the Magi reveals that Jesus has not just come to the Jews, but to all races. And Jesus'

baptism in the Jordan by John connects Jesus to the Old Testament prophecies, teaching us that this has been God's plan all along.

I'm lumping all these together because it's important to look at the whole story. Christianity is not just Christmas and Easter. Those are certainly highlights, celebrating the incarnation, and then crucifixion and resurrection, respectively. But all of these events are part of the story and its significance for the world. And it is important to think in terms of an overall plan which God has for the world, for sometimes it seems to us that there is no order to world events. As God gives humans free will, and humans are unpredictable, there may be no pattern to what we do, good and bad alike. But there is a pattern to God's actions, which God reveals to us little by little; and God will use our actions for his own purpose. It is not for us to know when the next stage will come, although God has revealed to us that Jesus will return and usher in the New Kingdom. It is enough for us to have faith in God and know that God loves the world and all the creation. Through the momentous events we have been discussing, God reveals to us what we must do to play our part: simply trust, believe, and give thanks that God has been and is acting in the world to bring about his kingdom on earth, when all will be complete and all his faithful children will join together in eternal life with him. To God be the glory, the blessing and the honour. Amen.