

The Pilgrimage

8 Jan.2012

Matthew 2:1-12

This morning we are going to consider the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem, following the birth of the Lord Jesus. As we will discover from the Bible record, many of our modern day pictures of Christmas are somewhat incorrect, and these have led to some confusion and ongoing misinformation.

Now, I know you may be asking, 'But, isn't Christmas finished.'

The answer is - NO!

Christmas is not merely a one day celebration event, or a marketing period determined by multi-national chain stores. The first Christmas was a series of events that took place over a period of time, from a few weeks to possibly a few months.

The first item from the reading today that probably needs some clarification is, 'Who were these visitors?' In the Greek they were called 'magi', which has often been interpreted to mean 'wise men' (vs.1).

These men were certainly learned scholars, astronomers, philosophers, and often advisors to kings. They were from a number of the nations to the east of Israel; places like Persia, Arabia and possibly even further east. They were men, devoted to the study of the sciences, and internationally held in high esteem by all people, including kings and rulers.

It was normal practice for people to seek out these men for counsel, however, in Matthew's gospel, we read that **they had travelled** a long distance to come to Jerusalem. Only something very special would warrant them making such a journey.

In vs.2 we discover the reason for their journey was as a result of their astrological studies. They had seen the rise of a star, unlike any other, that pointed the way toward the west. As a result, they came to the conclusion that a new King had been born in Jerusalem. This phenomenon was of such significance to them that they decided to travel themselves to pay homage and respect to this new born king. (vs.2)

I find it fascinating, when Herod the Great, the Roman appointed king of Judea, questioned the Magi, we read that 'ALL JERUSALEM' was troubled about this news with him (vs.3). It smacks of the royal inclusive; ie. when the king has a sore finger the whole nation experiences pain; or when the Queen says, 'we are not amused', and in fact she only means herself.

Herod naturally asked the Jewish priests and scribes as to their opinions. They concluded that, what the Magi described sounded a little like prophetic fulfilment, and so the Jewish scholars came to the conclusion that they should look to Bethlehem as the birth place of the promised messiah (vss.4-6).

Herod, of course, was a cunning, conniving, heartless, brutal and totally untrustworthy tyrant who had, in the past, ordered the execution/murder of many Jewish rabbis, and several of his own family, including his own wife Mariamne. Was it any surprise that he would plot the destruction of anyone, including a new born baby, who could challenge his claim to the throne of Israel (vss.7-8).

Following the departure of the magi from Jerusalem, they made their way to Bethlehem. In vs.9 we read that, even now, despite the conclusions of the Jewish priests and scribes, these magi continued to follow the star, which brought them great joy (vs.10).

Is this confirmation that they were not merely following the advice and directions of man, but preferred to be led by cosmic forces beyond the control of man? Could it be that they did not trust Herod's advisors, but sought assurance in the handiwork of God?

Whatever the reasons, the results speak for themselves. The magi soon arrived at Bethlehem and came to **a house, not a stable**, where Joseph and Mary were staying (vs.11). Here they saw the child Jesus. Here again is an important piece of information.

In **Luke's** record of the birth of Jesus, he used the Greek word 'brephos' to describe Jesus. This word is best translated 'babe' and was used to refer to an unborn or newborn child.

By contrast, in **Matthew's** record of the visit of the magi, the Greek word used to describe Jesus was 'paidion', which does not refer to a newborn babe, but a child under training. This tells us that culturally, at the time of the visit of the magi, Jesus was no longer considered a newborn baby.

The question must then be asked; How old was Jesus when the magi arrived? The simple answer is that we have no idea, however the indication is that some weeks, months, and even possibly a year, had passed.

This raises some further questions which we also cannot definitively answer:

- 1) When did the star, observed by the magi, first appear in the night sky - at the announcement of the conception of Jesus, or at his birth?
- 2) How long did the magi wait to study the star, take their measurements, and consult their ancient writings, before they began their journey?
- 3) How long did their journey take?

What we need to realise in these gospel records is that their primary purpose was not to record an historical time line, but to demonstrate that the life and ministry of Jesus was part of the revealed purpose and plan of God, even from before his birth.

The next thing we discover is the response of the magi when they saw Jesus. Vs.11 informs us that they 'fell down' and worshipped him. From their cultural backgrounds this was an appropriate response. They considered themselves in the presence of a king, and so they gave to this king all due honour.

The other thing they did was to offer gifts fit for a king. Now, we do not know **how many** magi made this journey to Bethlehem. It is pure artistic licence and fanciful tradition that has said there were three, and even given them names.

What we do know is that there were three different gifts. These were traditional gifts given by the nobility to a king for his life and death.

1) Gold was for the kings ongoing welfare and prosperity in life.

2) Frankincense is a very fragrant milky white resin, derived from a tree sap, that was used for personal and medicinal/hygenic purposes, much like some of our deodorants and creams today. It was also burnt in some religious ceremonies.

3) Myrrh is also a very fragrant resin derived from a tree sap. It is reddish-brown in colour and was widely used in religious ceremonies, especially to anoint the dead for burial.

Together, these gifts were highly appropriate for a king, and very valuable.

Once again, the record makes no mention as to how long the magi remained.

Vs.12 simply states, *'being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.'*

The timing and nature of the dream were never explained. All that they indicate was that, at God's appointed time, the visit was over.

The amazing thing, in all this record, is that these men were not Jewish. Culturally, their religious backgrounds were very different, and their doctrinal beliefs very foreign to the Jews of the day, and even ours today. And yet, as they studied the heavens, they came to an understanding of what God was saying to all mankind.

What we discover from this is that, the voice of God is never limited by our creeds, theological doctrines or religious traditions and practices. God speaks to the hearts of people in many ways, including through the wonders of his creation.

His spirit brings conviction and confirmation, as we earnestly reach out to Him to know and understand His divine will and purposes.

As these men looked and considered what this amazing star meant, they would have searched not only their ancient writings but also their own hearts and minds to understand its true significance.

In the final analysis, their visit to Bethlehem was a pilgrimage of faith. They stepped out in faith, never knowing what they would find.

Have you ever made a pilgrimage of faith?

Have you ever stepped out in faith, never knowing what would be at the end of your journey?

Today, there are so many people just living their lives. They are **not** on a pilgrimage of faith, and they still don't know what tomorrow will bring.

I wonder which is the scariest?

To be on a pilgrimage into the unknown, or to just live day by day not knowing God's purposes for you.

A pilgrimage of faith has, as its goal, to know the mind and will of God. By its very nature, it is focused in hope, because it looks forward to a time of fulfilment.

When commencing a pilgrimage of faith we start with 'where we are', but move to 'where God is'. It is a pilgrimage of discovery focused not on 'what we know' but on 'what God wants to reveal'.

For the magi, their pilgrimage of faith was the discovery of the child Jesus, the one born to change both the reality and direction of human history.

The magi may never have understood that the life of Jesus would lead to the cross. But, they came to an awareness that the life of this child would be forever transforming, forever critical to the well-being of all humanity.

As we focus on the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, including his death and resurrection, there is a real sense that we are also on a pilgrimage of faith.

As we look to Jesus, we discover that his life and words infect our thinking and being. We discover that, even today, God is speaking to us through the words and ministry of Jesus.

Our pilgrimage of faith may not be as dramatic as the magi, but it is real and important for us.

Our pilgrimage of faith has all the ingredients of moving forward with a clear purpose and hope.

We are not merely existing, and we are not aimless or purposeless.

Today, thank God anew that He has both spoken to us, and revealed Himself to us, in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. May you be truly blessed as you continue on your pilgrimage of faith.