

SERMON – 6/1/19

Matthew 2:1-12

‘They went into the house and when they saw the child with His mother, Mary, they knelt down and worshipped Him.’ (Matthew 2:11)

So that's it for another year. Christmas is over; the tree is down, the decorations are back in the loft; work has already started again for many; schools return tomorrow; the politicians will be back to knocking the stuffing out of each other again before long (no, I've not missed that either!)

So what now? It's a new year; refreshed after the holidays, there are new opportunities to grasp, new starts to be made, fresh motivation, lose weight, get fit, de-clutter, get organised. It's the season for resolve. The old year is gone with all its mistakes and disappointments. Things can be much better.

We could have started a new series of sermons, and let me tell you there is no shortage of things to study and reflect on. We could go anywhere, if we had the time. I'm certainly rearing to go. So you might be forgiven this morning for a hint of disappointment that we are still on the birth of Jesus. Didn't we have the wise men arriving with the shepherds and the angels at the nativity service three weeks ago?

Well if you are being liturgical, yesterday was the Twelfth Day of Christmas and today sees the beginning of the season of Epiphany. The focus of the readings for Epiphany is on the revelation of Christ to the world, beginning with the revelation of the baby Jesus to these visitors from afar. Yes, Christmas is over, but that's just the beginning of the story, the spring from which so much more will flow.

I've no doubt that all of you will have heard multiple sermons on this passage – like me, you will have been exhorted to follow the star and the many other signs that God gives that point us to Jesus. Wise men still seek Him! Like me, also, you will have heard the challenge to return home by another road, changed forever by your encounter with the Christ-child. Perhaps you will have heard explanations of why Bethlehem was the place to which directions needed to be given – the ancestral home of King David, the anointed king whose long-awaited successor Jesus was. Perhaps it will have been explained to you the significance of the three unusual gifts brought for the baby, gold for a king, frankincense because He was God; myrrh, a spice used to anoint the dead for burial, as a portent of what was to

come for Jesus. But I don't want to preach you one of those sermons this morning, edifying and beneficial though any one of them might be, because it is a different message that has been screaming at me to be proclaimed today, an exhortation for this first Sunday of the new year and for the weeks and months that lie ahead of us in the purposes of God.

A couple of things have struck me very forcibly in preparation for this morning that I feel very strongly need to be laid before us at this time as a congregation and as individuals. Neither of them is particularly earth-shattering and I do not claim any special insight in pointing out to you what is on this page of the Bible, but both of them have the potential to revolutionise what we are and the way that we go about things, so from that point of view I think these are appropriate things to say at the beginning of a new year.

Firstly, I was struck as I read this familiar passage that there is reference here to three groups of people and that each of these groups displays a different response to the news of the birth of the 'baby born to be king'.

There are the visitors from the east – traditionally known as the wise men, our translation describes them as 'some men who studied the stars.' They were astrologers, practitioners of magical arts even, and as such they present a bit of a problem. The church right from its Jewish roots and throughout its history has rightly dismissed magic and superstition – it has no place in the lives of those who put their trust in the Lord of the universe – so it is astonishing actually that this account found such a significant place in the Scriptures at all, unless of course it is an account of what happened. And more astonishing still is that it is these outsiders, these foreigners, these whacky new-agers who, we are told here, 'have come to *worship* Jesus.'

By contrast, King Herod, the head of state, the expression of worldly power, is said to be 'upset' by news of a potential rival to the throne, and upset with him, we read, is 'everyone else in Jerusalem.' And alongside them we find the chief priests and teachers of the law, the expression of religious power and authority of the day, summoned to answer the question of where the Messiah would be born. Perhaps we are not given the full nuance of their response, but it reads as a completely mechanical text-book answer. These religious leaders whose calling under God is to teach the people of Israel the ways of the God of Israel show not a murmur of

interest in the potential fulfilment of this prophecy on their watch. If God was going to send a message about the coming of the Messiah He wouldn't do it through some nomad star-gazers. Case dismissed.

Herod asks the visitors to report back to him ostensibly so that 'he too might go and worship' although later in the chapter we discover his true and murderous intentions as he orders the killing of all the boys in Bethlehem and district under the age of two. Threat dealt with (or so he liked to think).

The point I need to make this morning as we step out as a church into this new year is that maybe, just maybe God is at work as much if not maybe more out there than in here, and that the mission of Christ is less about our services and our meetings and our church and more about those who do not fit our mould but who are nonetheless seeking meaning beyond themselves. Many people in our community and in our nation are looking in entirely the wrong place for life in its fulness: like the wise men of old they are looking for it in the astrology charts or human philosophies, or they are looking for it in music or mind-altering substances, or at the gym or in the shopping mall. Of course they won't find it there, but perhaps they have seen a bright star or some other sign that is making them wonder where and what it might be leading to.

My friends, the imperative is before us now as never before to be pointing people to the Lord Jesus Christ, even (and perhaps especially) those whom we do not consider to be likely suspects. Today's powers that be are just as likely as King Herod was to be threatened by the Gospel message, and those for whom religion is important are also just as likely as the priests and lawyers of this morning's passage to close their ears to the message of the living God. Yet recent research suggest that the number of those who would define themselves as atheists is falling and that the number of those drifting in the direction of churches is beginning to increase. As Paul writes to the Romans: "How can people believe if they have not heard the message? And how can they hear if the message is not proclaimed? And how can the message be proclaimed if the messengers are not sent out?" (Romans 10:14-15)

Let 2019 be a year of invitation. Next week the Youth Alpha course is beginning – pray for our own Jampact members as they invite friends to come to that along with them; make it known to any teenagers you know. That age group is far more open to the Gospel than ever. Pray that those

who are looking for answers to life's big questions will find them in Christ this year.

Then secondly, it was the words I have taken as the text this morning that have stuck with me throughout the week as I have pondered this passage. Again writing of the wise men, Matthew says that as they left Jerusalem for Bethlehem when they saw the star again 'how happy they were, what joy was theirs.' Then this: 'They went into the house and when they saw the child with His mother, Mary, they knelt down and worshipped Him.'

There is nothing quite so winsome and infectious as happiness and joy. Of course we Scots do 'crabbit' and 'dour' rather than happy and joyful, especially when it comes to our worship. We can do boisterous and toe-tapping at a ceilidh, so why not when it comes to celebrating the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ?

Kneeling is not a big thing in reformed church circles. Actually, *any* unusual posture is regarded as a bit over the top in the Church of Scotland. We stand to sing, we sit for everything else. Simple. Making the sign of the cross, that's for Roman Catholics; they do kneeling in the English Church; clapping is for the Salvation Army and raising your hands is for charismatics. Of course, I get all that. You can do any of these things just because it's the done thing and it can so easily become a ritual. But perhaps we are missing something important. There can be something intensely powerful about physically humbling yourself as you pray – when I was in Ethiopia a few years ago and there was a marriage took place during the Sunday service I was preaching at, the bride and groom fell flat on their faces to receive the marriage blessing from the minister and elders. Praising God can be taken into a different dimension by physical expressions such as clapping or lifting your hands or dancing. Now don't worry – I'm not going to suggest that we do anything particular this morning or anytime in fact. But I *am* going to say that if you are ready this year to go deeper with God, to walk more closely with Jesus, then don't hold back from expressing that in new ways. If you feel like dancing as you worship as King David did then just go ahead and do it – it's for the Lord not for any human spectators – and if you do your dancing on the inside then that's absolutely fine. If you want to kneel as you pray (and your bones allow it) then just carry on, whether that's here during a service or at your bedside at home. Experiment with your posture as you worship

and as you pray. See where God may lead you in this coming year, closer than ever to the throne of grace and to an experience of the living presence of God.

So two things to ponder at the opening of the year. Perhaps God is calling us, calling me, calling you to be the guiding star that points others to the Saviour, and perhaps the people who will be guided by you are not in any way the folk that you might have expected to be looking for Christ at this time or indeed ever.

And hear this exhortation this morning and in the coming weeks to go deeper than you have ever been before in the life of the Spirit of God. How happy may you be; what joy may be yours! Come with the wise men – kneel down and worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the words of the psalmist: “Come, let us praise the LORD! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us! Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise. Come, let us bow down and worship him; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” (Psalm 95:1,2,6)

May we all be surprised this year at what God will do in us and among us and through us. For His name's sake.