

Scripture Readings for Sunday, January 3rd 2021

Colossians 1:25-29 (NIV)

²⁵I [, Paul,] have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Sermon: A New Beginning, A New Hope

It is 2021, a new start with a brand-new calendar to begin using. Even so, we can't forget the past, there is obviously continuity with 2020; COVID is still very much with us for a start! On that topic, we all know there is a long way to go in addressing the effects of this pandemic, nevertheless, I have more optimism than I had 9 months ago because of the new vaccines and treatments. Yet the suffering is *not* over, whether we are speaking medically, economically, socially, or psychologically; but we can, I believe, look forward into 2021 with both patience and hope. This brings us to the Christmas story. There we also celebrate a new beginning – indeed, a *New Testament* – yet one that is in continuity with God's story of saving his people, as detailed in the Old Testament. This new start is in the form of a vulnerable baby – a new life, a new hope, but there is a fair way to go before this child will become an adult and save the world. Even so, seeing that baby was enough for Simeon and Anna, as Olwyn mentioned last week. Simeon recognised that in this humble child was God's salvation for everyone – a *light* for revelation to the non-Jews and the cause of glory for Israel.¹ Moreover, the angel proclaimed to the lowly shepherds near Bethlehem that this particular baby was "a saviour, the Messiah, the Lord."² As in the first Christmas, we also look forward with both patience and hope as to what will happen next. Simeon's mention of "a *light* for revelation to the non-Jews" brings us to season of Epiphany, which begins on January 6th. That's when we celebrate the visit of the magi, God's revealing of himself to non-Jews in the form of a "star" – as told in Matthew's Gospel. Let's consider this familiar story this morning.

Some of you will have heard of the recent conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn where - on December 21st - they appeared visibly *very* close together³ in the night sky, a phenomenon that occurs only every 800 years. While this has been dubbed the "Christmas Star" and may fill us with wonder, it is *not* the precise conjunction that Matthew mentions in his report of the wise men. Nevertheless, if we are looking for an astronomical explanation to support that story, we are right to be considering planetary conjunctions in general, rather than a supernova or a comet.⁴ Astronomers have found similar conjunctions⁵ that could be interpreted as a special event for the nation of Israel – for those who are

¹ Luke 2:28-32; Col 1:25-27; Eph 1:11-14.

² Luke 2:10-12.

³ This is purely an "appearance," they are still millions of miles apart in their respective orbits around the Sun.

⁴ Various suggestions and opinions have been put forward for the "star," but no definitive explanation exists. The Greek word for "star" (*aster*) may not uniquely correspond to a literal "star" but to another heavenly event in the night sky. Moreover, Matthew – not being an expert – may not have used the correct technical term. One idea is that a supernova occurred – a star literally exploded. Such unpredictable events occur from time to time; a nova was observed in 1054, 1572, 1604 and in 1987. Chinese records suggest one such nova – or possibly a comet – occurred in 5BC – lasting, or being bright, for about 70 days. It is, however, doubtful that a nova is the right explanation as there are no signs of supernova remnants today – and novae do *not* move in the night sky in the way Matthew describes. If Matthew's star was a comet, which is not impossible, they may well have been interpreted as a political disturbance or regime change – in other words, as a *bad omen*! If so, when the wise men informed Herod the comet was a birth sign the King of the Jews, then no wonder he was a troubled man! Now Halley's comet occurred in 12 BC, too early to be the "star" of Bethlehem. However, its appearance prompted one Roman historian (Dio Cassius) to link it with the death of Markus Agrippa and wrote: "the star called comet stood for several days over the city [of Rome]." Furthermore, Halley's Comet re-appeared in AD 64, in living memory of Matthew's readers.

⁵ It is not just the conjunction but the background *constellation* that is also important to consider, and their associations.

so inclined. These relatively rare conjunctions may well have been interpreted by those astrologers as an occasion of tremendous significance and worthy of going to great lengths in order to honour a king.⁶ We cannot, however, come to a firm astronomical conclusion over the “Star of Bethlehem.” But I encourage you *not* to seek definitive scientific “proof” in such matters, as that will always be elusive. As Paul says, “We walk by *faith*, not by sight.”⁷

We also have to consider another possible explanation, namely that Matthew is making a *literary* connection to Old Testament images and prophecy.⁸ This would be very relevant to a Jewish audience, and many scholars see that as Matthew’s primary readership. Consider, for example, Isaiah 60, where we read: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. . . Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you . . . the wealth of the nations shall come to you. . . *They shall bring gold and frankincense*, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”⁹ This “end times” oracle is one of many that speaks of the gathering of those of other nations to come and worship God. With the visit of the magi, Matthew is informing his discerning audience that those days have now come with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, the rightful King of the Jews. This new king is in vivid contrast to harsh Herod, who everyone knew wasn’t even a pure-blooded Jew and was only a usurper appointed king by the conquering Romans.

Regardless of whether Matthew’s story of the Magi is *literary* rather than *literal*, it still contains a profound theological message!¹⁰ What is that message and what might it mean for us today? I suggest that we begin by looking at the characters in the story and see them in a *political* context. In the very first verse of Matthew’s gospel, he mentions that Jesus is “the Messiah” and “the Son of David,” and those titles have political overtones.¹¹ Consequently, how would Jesus be viewed by those in authority?

⁶ Moreover, as planets move around the sun, the motion from our earth-bound perspective is complicated. They appear to wander through the distant constellations, then stop, move backwards, stop, and then move forwards again. This “retrograde loop,” to use the technical term, is not unusual in itself and can loosely explain the “star” appearing to move in the night sky.

⁷ 2 Cor 5:7.

⁸ In the Greco-Roman world, a great leader would be expected to have a dramatic birth story with signs to testify and draw attention to the significance of the one who was born. Some scholars therefore see Matthew’s birth narrative as a stylized story, rather than *literal* history, yet one with a profound *theological* meaning. Consider, for example, Moses’ dramatic birth story (Exod 2:1-10)! Matthew has many parallels between Jesus and Moses in his gospel, including one who also goes to Egypt and returns, and as one who is tested in the wilderness. Furthermore, just as Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, so Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount that explained and revised the Mosaic Law. Moreover, Matthew’s birth story might have been alluding to an incident in Moses’ day concerning the seer Balaam in Num 22-24. The non-Jew Balaam, a magus who also came from the East, prophesies “an oracle of the man whose eye sees clearly; the oracle of one who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty. . . I see him (says Balaam), but not now; I behold him, but not near— *a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter (or a king) shall rise out of Israel* . . . (Num 24:15-17). When the book of Numbers was written, the prophecy probably referred to the future King David, but in 1st century Palestine, this was commonly understood as a messianic reference.

⁹ Isa 60:1-6.

¹⁰ It is not impossible that the “star” was a real astronomical phenomenon, and hence the visit of the wise men may *also* be based on kernel of *historical* truth.

¹¹ Matt 1:1.

Through this story, Matthew introduces that relationship as one of *conflict*, starting with King Herod. Herod the Great ruled Judea, with the support of Rome, from 37 BC until he died in 4 BC - incidentally, Jesus is thought to have been born near the end of his reign, somewhere between 6 and 4 BC. Herod was known for his extensive building projects, including major work on the Temple in Jerusalem; he was also known for his cruelty. For example, fearing treason, he brutally killed off one prominent Priestly dynasty,¹² one that included his second wife, Mariam(me), and his two sons by her! Caesar Augustus, remarked that “he would rather be Herod’s pig than his son” in that, since Herod did not eat pork, the pig would have better survival chances!¹³

Matthew also introduces “wise men from the east”¹⁴ who, incidentally, were *not* kings, and are traditionally regarded to be astrologers or religious priests from Persia.¹⁵ They could have been Zoroastrians who shared some beliefs with Jewish Pharisees, such as in a supreme deity, a final saviour who would come to rule in righteousness, and in an afterlife. We should not regard them as those who write horoscopes in daily newspapers – rather they are the academics and royal advisors of their day. The astrologers’ observations of the movements in the sky were seen as providing omens, warnings, and signs to the *kings or rulers*. It would therefore be quite natural that these wise men would first approach King Herod in Jerusalem.

Well, what happens? King Herod is alarmed!¹⁶ He too has sources of wisdom to consult, and so he asks the chief priests and experts in the Jewish Scriptures *where* the Messiah was to be born. The point being that no new royal son had recently been born in the Palace, and so could it *really* be that God’s Chosen Son, the long-awaited Messiah, had actually been born? The religious experts’ response suggests that Herod himself did not know the Hebrew Scriptures too well, and they tell him that an obscure prophet, Micah, identified the Messiah’s birthplace as Bethlehem, which also implies a king in the line of David.¹⁷

Taking some liberties and reading *into* the story, there seem to be some ironies here. First, you’ll notice that although the religious leaders seem to know their scripture, they do not *act* on it – their curiosity is not sufficiently aroused to discover the whereabouts of the Christ-child. Herod, with ulterior motives, then sends the wise men on their way.¹⁸ Second, these foreign wise men are portrayed as having recognised something of great significance – a *sign* in the night sky. They were even prepared to undertake an arduous pilgrimage to honour a special king, yet the Jews failed to recognise what was right under their own noses. This, I suggest, is Matthew’s miniature of Jesus’ life and ministry; it is a shocking point that is also reflected in the other gospels. John writes: “He was in the world, and the

¹² The Hasmoneans, descendants of the Maccabees.

¹³ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, (Penguin, 1993), p19.

¹⁴ Matt 2:1.

¹⁵ If true, recall the Persians overthrew the Babylonians, who had captured and exiled the Israelites. The implication being, even these people not respect Israel’s new “King” (or Messiah).

¹⁶ Matt 2:3.

¹⁷ See Mic 5:2. This also has political overtones. Note: “Bethlehem” was (King) “David’s (birth) city”; 1 Sam 17:12.

¹⁸ See Matt 2:7-8.

world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”¹⁹ I will come back to that in a moment.

Thankfully, as the wise men left Jerusalem, they were reassured by seeing the heavenly sign again and we are told they were “overwhelmed with joy.”²⁰ They came to Bethlehem, knelt down and *worshipped* the child Jesus. Let’s reflect on that word “worshipped,” a word Matthew has mentioned *three* times in this short passage.²¹ To a Jew, only *God* was worthy of worship, yet here the focal point of worship in the child, Jesus. This, I believe, is significant for it speaks to the *identity* of Jesus as one who is *worthy* of worship. Moreover, to worship Jesus is *not* – claims Matthew – to be seen as sacrilegious. That is a shocking point to grasp so early in the Gospel! Next, these non-Jews could finally honour the true “King of the Jews” with gifts that are fit for a king. However, the circumstances were not ones they envisaged. The King of the Jews was not to be found in a prestigious palace in the main city, but a humble home in a small town. In their journey, these learned men had their preconceived ideas changed. God does that! God ultimately fulfils their hearts desire, but surprises them along the way – and sends them onward along a different route. Expect surprises from God – he will not fit in with our expectations, but will continue to stretch our faith, imagination, and our intellect. That, I suggest, is also a feature of Matthew’s Gospel in miniature.

What other things can we take from this story and consider afresh today? First, consider that the wise men’s search to the Christ-child was based solely on human wisdom and that led them to Jerusalem. It took the Jewish scriptures to pin-point the location as Bethlehem. The same is true today. As we saw with possible physical explanations for the star, trying to understand the mind of God through human reason, with natural theology and philosophical arguments, can certainly point us in the right direction, but can only lead us so far. Ultimately, we need to turn to the Scripture to encounter both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. We need God’s Spirit to reveal Godself to us. Are we open to that possibility?

Second, recall that Matthew’s *readership* contained non-Jewish Christians who could relate to the wise men in that they also had come to recognise Jesus as their *saviour* and so *worship* him. As I mentioned earlier, one of the pressing questions of the day was why didn’t *more* Jews recognise Jesus as their Messiah? Matthew will respond to that in various ways throughout his Gospel, trying to help his Jewish readers see that connection, not least by his pointing to relevant Old Testament texts – like he did here in citing the prophet, Micah.²² The hard-hearted attitude of Herod and his advisors, who had the wisdom of scriptures as their guide and yet chose to ignore them, was *not* a comparison with which devout Jews would like to be connected. Matthew is therefore trying to *reveal* to his readers a mystery

¹⁹ John 1:10-11.

²⁰ Matt 2:10.

²¹ Matt 2:2,8,11. See also Matt 14:33; 28:9,17.

²² See Matt 2:6. One of Matthew’s catchphrases was “This all happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be *fulfilled*”; see, for example, Matt 1:22-23; 2:15-18,23; 3:3; 8:17; 11:10; 12:17-21; 15:7-9; 21:4-5,42; 27:9-10.

that was previously hidden – and that’s the meaning of Epiphany. Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah; he is also the Saviour of the World! May we *not* be like Herod’s advisors, people who knew the scriptures but failed to act on them.

Finally, as we begin this new year, are we going to recognise God’s new beginning presented here in this story of the Magi? Are we prepared to come and not just *tolerate* Jesus, or *merely* respect him as a good man, but actually *worship* him as the Saviour of the World? Right now, most people are putting their trust in COVID vaccines as the saviour of the World! I get it and I agree we desperately need these vaccines. And I encourage everyone to get vaccinated once they are made available to us. But Jesus as Saviour of the World is much more than a vaccine – one or two injections and we are “saved” and can carry on with our lives just as before. I think we all need *rescuing* from more than just COVID!²³ Let’s look carefully at our own lives and at the health and wellbeing of our society as a whole, and let’s be honest with ourselves of our continual need of God’s provision of a savior. Black Lives Matter and white privilege is just one important example that came to the fore in 2020. Our hope, then, is not – *ultimately* - in new technology, or social progress, or more research and better education, or in legal reform, or in political solutions; these things – *important though they undoubtedly are* – *will not in themselves* deliver us from the many, complex problems in our society. Of course, God can - and does - make use of those processes, just as God can use the medical profession as a means of our healing. But this story asks us to actively trust in *Jesus as our savior* and to recognize him as worthy our *prime* loyalty. The wise men were searching for a king and found Jesus instead. May we follow their example and be persistent in seeking and worshipful in finding. Amen.

²³ Micah prophesied a leader would come and bring about peace – *shalom*. While our world still longs for the absence of war, *shalom* is much more than that. Living in peace means in a right relationship with God, with each other, and with all of creation. Christians believe that Jesus inaugurated that *shalom* with his life, death, and resurrection. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a45.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Do-We-Want-A-Saviour.pdf>.