

Scripture for January 2, 2022

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 Jerusalem² and 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.”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When 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.’”⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He 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.”⁹ After 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.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On 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.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

John 1:1-18 (NIV)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Sermon: “Truth is Stranger than Fiction”¹

I love a good detective mystery. It’s a genre of fiction that lives on and on, inspiring and tantalizing our imaginations. Such stories are also visualized in plays, TV series, and movies, and endearing dramas are often revitalized with each new generation of actors and directors. I have my favourites, as I am sure do you, and someone in my position has to give a shout out to amateur sleuths like Father Brown, Brother Cadfael, and Grantchester’s vicars! What they all have in common is a crime scene; an event has *already* happened. But *what* exactly happened, and *when*? *Who* ‘dun’ it and *why*? Motivation, means, and opportunity are all explored, along with complex family dynamics and a few red herrings. And this is where our imaginations come in because *we* try to figure it out ourselves before the detectives do.

The Church’s season of Epiphany, which we celebrate on January 6th, is also where a mystery is revealed. But in this case, it’s a divine mystery and we need God’s help in understanding the secret. And the reason for that is because “truth is stranger than fiction.” As in a detective story, a death has happened, and we need to try and make sense of it. In this case it’s the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, and all the Gospel writers spend a disproportionate part of their accounts describing the last week of Jesus’ life. And the reason for that is because of the subsequent *resurrection* of Jesus, and *that’s* a profound mystery that needs explaining! *If* the resurrection had *not* taken place, we would *never* have heard of Jesus; if anything, he would simply be a footnote to history as one of the many rebels the Romans crucified. Those disciples, however, couldn’t deny their experience of the risen Jesus, and so they concluded that the resurrection had to be *an act of God*. If *God* raised Jesus from the dead, then the *what* and *who* are resolved, but the *why* still needed explaining. That was the conundrum of the early followers of Jesus. That *why* question forced the disciples to re-examine *who* Jesus was – and is – and *why* would God raise this *particular* man from the dead. And, being good Jews, they searched their sacred scriptures, especially the prophetic writings, as well as recalled all that Jesus said and did. The Gospels all try to explain this great mystery, and Matthew and Luke extend their rationales back to the birth of Jesus, claiming that God’s hand was in that event too. We have explored aspects of this birth throughout Advent; God’s messengers - angels - were involved, revealing to Mary,² Joseph,³ and the shepherds⁴ *who* it was that was born in Bethlehem. Remember, the angel Gabriel said to Mary that her son, Jesus, will be a great man and he’ll be called the son of God. Moreover, God will make Jesus a king, like his ancestor David, and his kingdom will never come to an end.⁵ The angel also announced to the

¹ A now-proverbial phrase coined by Lord Byron in the satirical poem *Don Juan*, 1823.

² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Worries-and-Joys-of-Mary.pdf> .

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Joseph%E2%80%99s-Crisis-of-Conscience.pdf> .

⁴ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Savior-Messiah-Lord.pdf> .

⁵ See Luke 1:32.

shepherds that the baby in the manger was the savior, the Messiah, and Lord of all.⁶ Consequently, Matthew and Luke tell their readers that to ultimately make sense of the resurrection, we need to know *who* it was that God raised from the dead; it was God’s anointed One, the Messiah, the true King, the person who has transformed world history and whose birth we celebrate at Christmastime.

Matthew also presents a distinctive *sign* concerning Jesus in his account of the wise men from the East.⁷ Just like detectives exploring a mystery, we must ask: “What does this strange visitation *mean*?”⁸ First, recall that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Luke alludes to Isaiah 1:3, which says: “An ox recognizes its owner, a donkey recognizes its master’s manger; but Israel does not recognize me, my people do not understand.”⁹ And in our other Gospel reading today from John, he writes: “Jesus came to his fellow Jews, but they did not welcome him.”¹⁰ Second, Luke’s visit from the shepherds on the night Jesus was born reveals that it was social *outsiders* who, prompted by the angels, were the first to witness the birth of the savior. With that in mind - and knowing that there’s no evidence that Matthew and Luke knew of each others’ Gospels - it’s fascinating that Matthew has complete *outsiders* from the Jewish faith as *his* first witnesses to the Christ-child.¹¹ The wise men from the East came to honor the recently born king of the Jews, because they recognised an astrological sign as pointing to that event. In this case, it wasn’t an angelic message that prompted their action but human wisdom. Whether we are scientists or artists, we can be inspired by creation and, if we are open-minded, we can recognize that as a sign pointing to the Creator. When those moments happen, let’s not dismiss them but instead follow those insights to their journey’s end, just as the Magi did. Human logic led them to Jerusalem, for they expected a king to be in a palace. Yet when they got there, no one had recognized the heavenly sign that was so obvious to the Magi. That is Matthew’s subtle - but pointed - irony to his readers, echoing that of Luke and John. As I said a moment ago, Jesus came to his fellow Jews, but the religious and civic leaders didn’t recognize him; that’s quite an inditement.¹²

When the wise men finally arrived in Bethlehem, they knelt and *worshipped*¹³ the infant, Jesus. Remember, to a Jew, only *God* was worthy of worship, yet here the focal point of worship in the Christ child. This, I believe, is significant for it’s another sign that points to the *identity* of Jesus. Moreover, to worship Jesus is *not* – claims Matthew – to be seen as sacrilegious. That is a shocking point to grasp so

⁶ See Luke 2:10-12; see also Simeon’s proclamation in Luke 2:28-32. In Matt 1:21, the angel’s message to a troubled Joseph informs that Jesus “will save his people from their sins.”

⁷ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-New-Beginning-A-New-Hope.pdf> .

⁸ Note: the *meaning* of the Magi story is more important than its historicity.

⁹ Luke mentions the word manger—or feed trough—*three* times, Luke 2:7, 12, 16. See also [4].

¹⁰ John 1:11, paraphrased. The common question why the Jews in general did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah is therefore considered and addressed by the Gospel writers.

¹¹ There is no evidence that Matthew knew of Luke’s version when he wrote his own gospel, and vice versa.

¹² Matthew cleverly uses this incident to introduce a prophetic oracle from Micah 5:2 that said the messiah will be born in Bethlehem, the city linked with great King David, yet another pointed irony that links to royalty (Matt 2:5-6). Jesus the Messiah is – says Matthew - the rightful King of the Jews. This 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.

¹³ Matthew mentions “worshipped” *three* times in this short passage; Matt 2:2,8,11.

early in his Gospel! At their journey's end, these non-Jews finally honour the true "King of the Jews" with gifts that are fit for a king. The mystery is therefore solved; what was hidden has finally been discovered. In this case, human wisdom and curiosity were involved, but so were the Scriptures that pointed to Bethlehem. The signs *are* there if we choose to see them. And the Holy Spirit is still assisting open-minded people to have their own *aha* moments of discovery of the truth of this divine mystery today. As I mentioned earlier, our reading from John's gospel acknowledges that lack of acceptance of Jesus among many Jews, and then John continues: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."¹⁴ And that all includes non-Jews, like the Magi, like you and me - and anyone who comes to Jesus and acknowledges him as Savior, Messiah, and King. That is the mystery being revealed, one that only began to make real sense to the disciples after the resurrection, and with the help of the Holy Spirit – rather than angels.

Now John's Gospel doesn't begin with a birth narrative, but he does begin with a divine mystery being revealed concerning the identity of Jesus. He came to the conclusion that Jesus even existed *before* the world began and co-created the universe. He says: "All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created."¹⁵ Jesus, says John, shared the divine nature and - even more shockingly - became human and lived among us, truthfully revealing God's graciousness towards us.¹⁶ And that's also why it is appropriate to *worship* Jesus, for he is both fully divine and fully human. Yes, "truth is stranger than fiction," says John - and other New Testament writers come to the same conclusion.¹⁷

Poirot, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, uses his little grey cells to come to the conclusion that either all eleven of the first-class passengers were involved in the infamous murder, or an unknown mafia assassin did it while the train was stopped. Far-fetched? Of course – it's Agatha Christie, after all! Could all eleven have possibly done it; with sufficient motive and planning, yes says Poirot. And in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the old professor tells Peter and Susan that either Lucy is a liar or she's mad or she's telling the truth about her discovery of Narnia through the back of the wardrobe. He then says Lucy is clearly not crazy, and her siblings admit she's generally a truthful person, so the professor concludes that logically Lucy is to be believed for the present, and to keep on looking for more evidence.¹⁸ Far-fetched? Of course! But the application of logic and having an open mind while looking for further reliable evidence is how a mystery is solved.

¹⁴ John 1:12; see also John 10:16.

¹⁵ John 1:3. (See also John 1:1-2 where Jesus is the divine Word. See also Col 1:15-20; Phil 2:6-11, and Heb 1:3.)

¹⁶ John 1:14, 18. (See also [15].)

¹⁷ See [15]; Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021) and

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Three-in-One-and-One-in-Three.pdf> .

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (HarperCollins, 1950), 48. Incidentally, C. S. Lewis found the notion that the Christ-event was a "true myth" profoundly instrumental in his own faith journey. For Lewis, the critical difference was that the Christ-event was not just like any cultural story or folklore but was *a myth that really happened* and through which God communicated to humankind; see Downing, *Most Reluctant Convert*, 147–8, 156.

In a similar way, the New Testament writers had their beliefs about the way the world works turned upside down by the resurrection of Jesus. Not just in terms of science, but their Jewish faith too, because they came to understand that Jesus was God's Messiah or Chosen One – and that changes everything. That was the divine mystery that was being revealed by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁹ And that's what we celebrate at Epiphany, for it changes everything for us too. The truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

What might all this mean for us today, at the beginning of 2022?

One of the things that arises from solving a mystery is a *proper perspective*. It's a *truthful* explanation of events, however strange they may be.²⁰ The beginning of a new year is always an opportunity for us to turn over a page and start again. We want to be positive, optimistic, and to put the past behind us. There's no problem with that. However, unless we have a proper perspective, our past will quickly catch up with our new aspirations. We therefore need to be mindful of *not* deceiving ourselves to reality, but to embrace an honest assessment of ourselves – our strengths and weaknesses, and all that influences us. Of course, we need to practice this every day to enhance wholesome living, but New Year is often a time that we reflect on our progress as we hang up a new calendar. I may be preaching to the proverbial choir here, but I suggest that 2022 is a year in which *the world* desperately needs a proper perspective, a truthful explanation of events, and without that we will continue to make a mess of things. Just as a detective seeks the facts and so needs to be discerning of truth from lies, so we must do the same. That means breaking free from social media algorithms and circular logic that only mislead, creating red herrings and dead ends. For those embroiled in conspiracy theories, the truth is often *simpler* or less convoluted than fiction, and that might seem too strange to believe to some! Yet Jesus said, "the truth will set you free."²¹ I believe the truth will provide a proper perspective, even if it doesn't feel very liberating at times. And without that, we will be trapped in the downwards spiral of bondage – to lies, half-truths, and deception, and from which we cannot find freedom until we backtrack to a *truthful* explanation of reality, so giving the opportunity for a proper perspective.

If we can appreciate this broader analysis in the context of COVID, perhaps that might also enable us to better see that a *healthy* Christian faith can also contribute positively to our wellbeing, as individuals and as a global society. And that, I maintain, begins with understanding the truth of *who* Jesus is – his identity, from which we too can have a proper perspective of reality. But be warned: distorted Christian perspectives also abound, so please be discerning! Nevertheless, in this New Year, let us recommit ourselves to this mysterious divine reality that has been revealed to the whole world. For only if our feet are firmly planted on truthful foundations are we able to address the spiritual, physical, and social issues that plague our world today. Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁹ Add to that list, Christ's baptism and his transfiguration.

²⁰ Not just events, but the motivation too.

²¹ John 8:32, see the whole of the chapter for his (different) broader context.