



Sermon
5th January 2020

What we learn from the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12, Is 60:1-6 ; Ps 72:1-7,10-14 ; Eph 3:1-12

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Today we celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the world. And the theme starts with the coming of the Magi to see the infant Jesus.

1. Christmas just a pagan conversion?

Recently, I came across a blog posting "Christmas isn't actually pagan!"¹ It is often claimed that Christians took over one of several mid-winter pagan festivals. However, Dr Peter Gainsford writes that our Christmas celebrations are not even a little bit pagan in origin. He, as a Greek Classicist and Teaching Fellow at Victoria University, has researched the subject and says it is not true.

Christmas didn't replace any Roman holiday, and it wasn't adapted from one. One document from 400AD explicitly contrasts Christmas with the secular New Year festival.

- **Yule:** The first mention of Yule is in the writing of the Ven Bede in the C8th but Christmas was already being celebrated at least 400 years earlier.
- **Saturnalia** continued to be celebrated, by Christians, alongside Christmas, for at least a century and probably a lot longer. **Brumalia** survived longer still.
- **Sol Invictus** was confined to Rome and it isn't attested any earlier than Christmas anyway.
- **Mithras** worship: all of its purported similarities with Christianity are fictional and were mostly made up in the 1990s.

The modern trappings of Christmas date from 16th - 20th centuries in Christian countries:

- Father Christmas originates in a blend of St Nicholas and the Christkind, which Luther associated with Christmas in the 1500s to discourage the Catholic cult of St Nicholas and his feast day on 6 December.
- Decorated fir trees are first known in the 1600s.
- Advent wreaths originated in colonial North America.
- Advent calendars in C19th Germany.
- Christmas cards in C19th England.
- Santa's flying reindeer along with a representation of Santa by the Coca Cola Corporation in the C20th.

Where did the 25th December date come from?

The earliest document giving the date of Christmas is a list of festivals from 354AD. Dr Gainsford lists four possible reasons for choosing the date but the strongest appears to be that ancient Judaeo-Christian writers treated prophets and saints as having the same date for their birthday and death-day. Around 200AD, Clement of Alexandria reinterpreted this to conception rather than birth. They had calculated that Jesus died on 25th March, so if this is also the day of his conception, his birthdate 9 months later would be 25th December.

2. What about the visit of the Wise men?

First of all some ideas that have developed that are not supported by the Bible:

- They did not come at the same time as the shepherds. The description says the Holy Family were in a house so

¹ <http://kiwihellenist.blogspot.com/2015/12/christmas-and-its-supposed-pagan-links.html>

events had moved on.

- The implication from Herod's decision to kill all the boys under 2 years of age, is that the birth could have been a maximum of two years before, but more likely to be 6 to 12 months.
- The number of visitors isn't given and no names are recorded. The idea of three is probably based on three gifts being named. However, it would be unsafe for wealthy travellers to be in a small party – so with servants and soldiers, I have read suggestions of 100 to 300 people in the caravan.
- There is no mention of camels – it is very probable they used camels but it is not specified.

3. Who were the wise men?

Matthew says these visitors were *Magi* who came from the East. Sometimes *Magi* is rendered wise men, sometimes astrologers, and sometimes we talk of kings.

Magi were the priest class in Persia. They were court advisors. When Daniel was taken to Babylon to be trained, he and his fellow young Jews were found to be ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in all kingdom,² and he was appointed ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

In Ester 1, the various terms are used together. When the Babylonian King was disturbed by a difficult question he turned for advice to his wise men. He addressed:

... the wise men who knew the times, ... the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom...³

There they are called wise men who knew the times, princes and “those who sat first in the Kingdom.” These are the principal advisors to the king. Their title prince may be translated with a range of meanings from captain through official to ruler.

Meanwhile, Psalm 72 speaks of kings coming to honour a future king of Israel:

The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. ... May gold from Sheba be given to him.⁴

Similarly, Isaiah 60 looks forward to God's glory shining forth from Israel and the nations coming to that light, kings bringing their riches, gold and incense.

With that background, it is easy to see why people started to call the Magi kings.

4. What did the Magi do?

What did the Magi do and can we learn from their example?

a. They were committed

They were committed to the revelation they had received. Historical records indicate that there was a growing expectation in the East that a world leader was about to be born. These men, having discerned that the King of the Jews had been born, travelled far to visit – possibly for four months. Such a trip would be expensive in money and time – it is a real commitment. They said that they saw his star in the East. We could infer that they were no longer seeing it, both from the verb tense and their later joy at seeing the star again. Four or more months is a long time to travel without reassurance and confirmation.

How committed are we to seek the Lord? When we have some insight or revelation, are we prepared to pray, study, spend money, travel, to put ourselves out to pursue what God is showing us?

The star sighting only directed them to Israel. So they went to the logical place: the capital and to the palace. We can understand that the arrival of a sizable, armed, foreign expedition would disturb the city. For Herod, paranoid at the best of times, it would be very threatening. So he called the religious advisors to ask where the Messiah would be born and they correctly interpret scripture to point to Bethlehem.

Did you notice, the religious leaders do not go to see what the Magi might find. Where was their curiosity, their zeal? They knew where the Messiah was to be born but when foreigners came saying it had happened they just pointed the

² Daniel 1:20, 2:48

³ Esther 1:13-14 [RSV]

⁴ Psalm 72:10ff

way and ignored the matter! It is something I see today as well, people ignore the work of God right alongside and can't be bothered to have a look. Let us not be in that category!

b. They Came to Worship

They came intending to honour or worship the baby. These are high officials were intent on honouring the royal baby of another country. The word used, *proskyneo*, means to prostrate oneself in worship. When we seek the Lord, do we come to worship him? That is the right motivation – not intellectual interest but a desire to seek the Lord of Lords and worship him.

c. They Rejoiced

When the Magi are sent off by Herod to find the child, they see the star again. But whereas before they saw the star (not continuously) now it went ahead of them (the continuous past). It was directly leading them until it stopped over the house where the child was. There are many hypotheses about what the Bethlehem star was - from supernova to a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter which happened three times in the year 7BC. However, I find it hard to see how an astronomical event could indicate a particular house. Personally, I am intrigued by the idea of Dr Michael Wilkins, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Biola University, who suggests the star was not an astronomical event but an angelic manifestation. Angels are referred to as stars in ten other places in scripture. The angel of the Lord led the Hebrew people through their wilderness wanderings. It is possible that in the same way that angels announced Jesus' conception to Mary and to Joseph, and his birth to the shepherds, this star could have been the manifestation of an angel leading the Magi to the actual house where he was.

There is also the reaction of the Magi to seeing the star again: they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy! Yes, faced with finding a baby in a foreign town it was great to have a direct guide. Yes, it was great to be reassured that you are still on the right track. But this joy is enormous – have you every seen exceedingly great joy? It seems to me consistent with a spiritual cause; with an angelic presence.

When we seek the Lord, as we have revelations and encouragements, when we see answers to prayer and healings - there is joy. Joy is good. I am amazed that the Magi who were court officials were able to release into exceedingly great joy. We are often too straight-jacketed to be real.

d. They Humbled Themselves

When the Magi came to the house, they worshipped. And Matthew tells us they fell down and also they prostrated themselves and worshipped. It's as if he was saying, I mean they really did kneel down and worship. Here were principal men of another nation humbling themselves before the baby in a small house in a small town.

Do we humble ourselves before the Lord? They must have been convinced about his greatness even though they didn't understand it fully. We know much more than they, are we convinced?

e. They Gave Gifts

Then they gave to the baby their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. You know the usual associations that these were gold for a king, frankincense which was used in worship for a god and myrrh which was used for embalming as an indication of the death he would suffer.

I think we could relate those gifts to what we may be called upon to give.

Gold: obviously our monetary giving. Are we giving what he calls us to give? Does it honour him or are we giving a minor tip?

Frankincense: This spice was used for incense in worship and in scripture represents the prayers and worship of the saints. Are you giving him worship? Are you praying - not just asking for things but conversing?

Myrrh: This was used for embalming and was offered to Jesus in the drink at the cross to dull his pain – although he refused it. To me this speaks of sacrifice. Does our worship cost us? Are we prepared to share in the sufferings of Jesus. That does not mean being crucified but the work of the Kingdom and the extension of the Kingdom requires sacrifices to be made. This is an offering – are you ready to make it too?

5. Epiphany – Christ to all the Nations

The point of Epiphany is that Christ is made known not just to the covenant people of God, the Jews, but to all the nations. That was the special focus of Paul's ministry to take the gospel to other nations, to tell them - to tell us - that in Christ we may approach God with freedom and confidence – that is good news!

That is still the need in this day. We need to be assured of our position in Christ. Then we need to be telling others. There are so many in our own country who do not know or understand; there are so many in other parts of the world who need to know of Jesus and his great rescue; who need to hear the good news of repentance and forgiveness in His name.

I don't think God expects us all to reach everyone – that is impossible. But he will give us opportunities to connect with some people in the course of our lives. Who might that be for you?

6. Alpha Course

We are running the Alpha Course again starting in mid-February. We have arranged with Kingsway School for an invitation to go to parents on the waiting list, so there could be a big response. Would you think about being involved?

- Do you need to attend to clarify your relationship with Jesus?
- Do you have a friend you need to invite and come along with them to make it easy for them to attend?
- Perhaps you need to be on the team with the adults, the crèche, children, cooking, serving, with prayer, with admin?
- In terms of gold, frankincense and myrrh: is this a correspondence to offering your time or money? Is it part of your worship? Is it a sacrifice for the kingdom that God is asking of you?

Invitations for you or a friend are available as you go out and there is a signup sheet to offer your help on the team on the foyer table.