



Showing forth Christ

Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon 3rd January 2021

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How many of you saw the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn before Christmas? Sadly it was cloudy most of that week, but I did see it the day before its best. Being short-sighted it looked like a single star to my eyes, but through binoculars I could see both planets separately. There was some talk about it being the Bethlehem star. What do you think about that?

I was not sympathetic to the idea. Indeed last year, I said that I was interested in the suggestion that the star the Magi followed was perhaps an angel rather than a celestial object since it seemed to be so able to direct them even to a village. I was planning to say that again this year but then yesterday, I searched and found a relatively new hypothesis based on the work of several writers which suggests that the star may have been observations of several planetary conjunctions after all.

The writer publishing the idea is one Richard Larson who has brought together the work of various astronomers and historians. He advances the idea that the Bethlehem star was a series of three conjunctions of Jupiter with the star Regulus (the “king star”) in the constellation of Leo followed 9 months later in the same year by a conjunction of Jupiter with Venus making the brightest ‘star’ ever seen. There hasn’t been so close a conjunction of those two planets since.

In the astrological interpretative framework of the Babylonians that would signify a king in Israel and a royal birth. These signs appeared in the East leading the Magi from Babylon towards Israel. Then the stopping of the star over Bethlehem can be understood because of planetary motion where planets appear to move across the sky and then move back again as our orbit changes the angle of view. At the end of that year, the motion of Jupiter would appear to stop in the southern sky. Bethlehem lies to the south of Jerusalem!

What Larson has to say is fascinating but too lengthy for me to cover in a sermon. But if he is right, he shows that the gospel has accurately reported this significant and apparently unlikely event. Despite all the scepticism, the gospel record would be shown to be accurate in yet another particular. Furthermore, it would show that God set up planetary motion from creation to coincide with or even mark his own birth and death. But then the New Testament does say that Jesus Christ was slain for us from before the creation and that we were chosen from before time.

Today we are observing Epiphany which celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the world. The Magi are the first non-Jews to come to see Jesus. They were highly regarded wise men and so astrologers of the Babylonian court. In his day, Daniel was elevated to the chief of the Magi due to his inspired wisdom and interpretation.

But what I want us to notice is that whatever the star was, they interpreted it to have the meaning that a king was born in Judah. And so they took action - they thought it was important to go and visit. But they didn’t only visit and give courtesy gifts, they worshipped! This is remarkable. They came announcing that intention: “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When they found the holy family, “they bowed down and worshipped him.”

Why would these Babylonians want to worship a Jewish baby king? Maybe Daniel's teachings and indeed his prophecies of the Messiah to come had been kept in their records and they understood more than the Jewish teachers of that day? They surely did not do the same for every prince born in surrounding countries. But then, they did not see signs in the sky pointing out those other princes.

Paul writes in his epistle to the Ephesians of his commission to make Christ known to the gentile nations. He makes four points:

1. His message was made known to him by revelation (v3).
2. That in Christ and through faith in him, we can approach God with freedom and confidence. (v12).
3. Gentiles are made heirs with Israel, brought into the one body and all share in the promise of Christ Jesus. (v6)
4. God intends to make his wisdom known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the church (v10-11).

In a sense, the Magi are a model of this. They received revelation. They freely approached Christ in confidence. They were Gentiles being drawn to the people of God through Christ. The wisdom of God was on display to the wise men of the world.

1. Paul's message was made known to him by revelation.

The insight that Paul shows is far beyond what could be deduced from the gospel accounts. It is Paul who opens up to us salvation by faith. It is Paul who grasped the importance of the inclusion of the Gentiles. It is Paul who has such a high view of the Church and its cosmic significance as is shown at the beginning of this letter. Such rarefied insight could only come from Holy Spirit revelation. Similarly, Jesus said Peter's insight that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God, was given to him by revelation and not deduced or learnt from men. So too, John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God, it was by revelation not from discussion with Jesus or some other source. John said God told him how to identify the Messiah.

It seems to me that the Magi had some degree of revelation as well. Their desire to worship and the exceeding great joy they experienced when they found Bethlehem are not the stuff of dry academia or courtly behaviour.

What do we do with revelations we receive? They are unlikely to be of such an import as those just mentioned, but if God speaks to us in some way, it is important. When the Creator of the universe speaks, worlds are created. When the Lover of our souls speaks, our lives are transformed – if they are fertile soil for the word to take root and grow. Friends, let us keep alert for ways God may speak to us in our daily lives and then be ready to respond and obey.

2. We may approach God with boldness and in confidence

We have great privilege in Christ. Paul tells us again here, that we have free access to the Father through Him. One of my commentaries suggests a better translation of verse 12 would be, "In whom we have boldness and access in confidence through his faithfulness."¹

How wonderful that we know can have confidence to come into the presence of God because Jesus has cleansed us from our sins. We can come with boldness because in Him we are adopted heirs of God.

Do you have that confidence? Do you know you are forgiven? It is important. If not, don't be content until you have resolved the issue. I preached on this once and afterwards someone came to see me who had been troubled by guilt for decades. After confession and prayer, that one came into assurance of forgiveness and knew a lightness of spirit for the first time. Why endure decades of misery and heaviness when the assurance of forgiveness and salvation is available to you now? Why live as if God were angry with you when you can know him as loving Father who delights in you? If you are struggling – please see me, Helen, Anne Aspden or another you trust who can bring you to that glorious freedom and joy.

3. Gentiles are included into the Body of God's people

Paul's makes the point that Gentiles believers are fully included with Jewish believers into God's people the Church. Christ was revealed to the Magi. As we move into the history of the early church, we see God acting

¹ Snodgrass, K., 1996, The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians, Zondervan, p164

sovereignly to draw Gentiles to faith and arrange for the gospel to be explained to them. Think of Philip preaching to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Think of Cornelius the Centurion who was visited by an angel and told to send for Peter. The gospel was not to be limited to the Jews but is for all nations. It is that imperative that drove the missionary movement of the 19th Century. It was not fun to travel to the other side of the world in those days, but Samuel Marsden was sent by the London Mission Society and then the Church Missionary Society to preach in these newly discovered lands. The first missionaries to West Africa had a life expectancy of two weeks when they landed due to disease. They went with their possessions packed in a coffin. Why – because this message of salvation is so important.

We have contact with Kondoa. Remember that district of Tanzania had been neglected as far as gospel outreach is concerned until 1990. I regard Given Gaula as the Apostle of Kondoa. Under his leadership, they are reaching villages which have never heard the gospel. On our last trip in 2018, we had the privilege of preaching in two villages where the gospel was first preached earlier that same year! The gospel is for all nations. All of us come needy and lost, to be saved and redeemed by our wonderful saviour, Jesus.

How important is it to you that others are told of Jesus? Do you value the work of missions – whether Kondoa in Tanzania or any other mission field? Paul wrote in Romans 10:14-15a:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

How will they hear unless someone tells them? How will someone tell them unless they are sent? Is this important? If so, be active in your support for missions work.

Most Kiwis have no idea about the gospel. Most seem to think our message is that you have to be good to go to church which is a hypocritical holiness club. How important is it that ignorant, secular kiwis know about Jesus? How will they know unless they are told? Who will tell them? What will you do? Will you invite friends to Alpha when we run one later this year? Will you invite them to church if the opportunity arises? Will you tell them? Will you...?

4. God will reveal his wisdom through the Church

Paul tells us that the Church has an astonishing role. We are not just to tell humans about Christ's redemption we are a display of God's wisdom to the heavenly powers! What an awesome commission. Now some understand these powers as earthly, but Paul specifically says they are heavenly powers. John Stott in his commentary considers these arguments and comes down on the side that the powers Paul refers to are not human but spiritual.

Now I don't think we have to do anything overt like proclaiming to the archangels. But maybe our response to God's grace and the change it brings in our lives, is the testimony. Maybe the way the gospel brings together Jew and Gentile and different races is the testimony of God's wisdom. So we don't want to spoil that testimony whether to humans or angels. Maybe far more hangs on our actions, our behaviour, our faith than we had realised? I hope you never has thought of the church as a club of likeminded believers. The Church, as revealed to Paul, has eternal, cosmic significance. It is far more than we see or dimly understand.

Today we celebrate Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ. It is the continuing task of the Church to manifest Christ, to show him to the world and as we have learnt also to heavenly powers. Can we learn from the Magi? Can we follow the light we have as we are led to Christ and bring him our best we have as our offering? May the light of Christ shine on and through us to the glory of God. Amen.