

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- 17th December 2023 am

TITLE: "God's grace and glory at Christmas "

TEXT: Matthew 2 verses 1-12 Series: Christmas 2023 Part 5

Scripture references from the ESV

Matthew 2:1-12 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

2000 years ago, a group of people met in a house to worship God in Bethlehem. Today, we are united to them in our worship of Jesus Christ, and we will all still be worshipping him 2000 years from now and into eternity. No matter when or where we live, or what our life is like, that unity in our worship of Christ the King is what connects us to the wise men in this gospel account.

Most of what we think we know about the wise men comes from carols, nativity plays and myths. Reading what the Bible has to say about them (above), we discover:

- They were not kings – Matthew refers to them as Magi (astrologers, magicians and interpreters of dreams)

- We do not know how many of them there were -there were three gifts, but no mention of how many men
- The star did not guide them from their homeland in the East – that is why they ended up in Jerusalem
- They did not visit a stable but a house (v11)

We need to go back to what the Bible teaches us rather than allowing ourselves to be carried along by the fairy tales that we so easily take on board. When we go to the gospels, we find that the narrative about these wise men is lifted out of the realm of myth and fable and teaches us something about the living God that will lead us to truly worship.

**God is actively displaying his glory and where we experience God's grace,
we will respond with extravagant sacrificial worship.**

You might wonder why God did not just take the wise men straight to Bethlehem, rather than letting them go to Jerusalem first, where they then alerted Herod to the existence of a rival King. We cannot know the answer for sure, but that event meant that Jerusalem heard the news that God's King had been born. God clearly intended that Herod (the fake King) and the religious leaders should hear that the Messiah had been born, and they heard the news through a group of pagan wise men.

- How did the people involved, and how do we, respond to this news?

We see three responses in this passage.

1. The hostility of Herod (v3). Why was Herod so troubled?

- Herod was not descended from any of the kings of Israel and had no right to be king of the Jews.
- At that time, there was an expectation circulating around the world that a ruler would arise from Judea.
- In that culture, the wise men's art of astrology was well respected

As far as Herod was concerned, the arrival of these travellers from the East with news of a new king being born brought a threat to his own rule. He had dealt with previous threats by murdering those involved, including his wife and children. His response to the threat of a rival king was the hostility of murder. To discover the child and have him killed, he set out to:

- deceive the wise men into thinking he is overjoyed at the birth of a new King
- send them to Bethlehem, and let them do the hard work of searching for the child
- get them to come back and tell him where the child is
- Once he had found this out, he would despatch his soldiers to the place, and they would deal with the threat.

Herod thought he could take on God, but he could not. God knew all that was in Herod's heart and saved his appointed King from death. A couple of years after the birth of Jesus, Herod (supposedly Herod the Great) would be dead, but the true King of the Jews will live on forever. This highlights a truth:

There can only be one king ruling over your life, and it is not you

Ever since Satan told us, in the Garden of Eden, that we would be as God, we have wanted to control our own lives, and as a result we see Jesus as a threat to our own self-rule. Though we cannot kill him physically, we find other ways:

- We deny his deity
- We ignore his commands in scripture
- We refuse to put him first in our lives
- Non-believers may turn their hostility towards God's people so believers may find themselves hated by others because they hate Christ.

Hostility towards Christ can show itself in a challenge to the God appointed authorities in our lives. We may refuse to submit to those who God has put over us for our good, whether it be parents, teachers, police or government. Even within the local church, Christ calls us to submit to one another and to the leaders appointed by God.

It is hostility to Christ that causes this refusal to submit.

We fail to submit to Jesus as King over our lives

when we refuse to accept the people he has brought into our lives to lead us.

2. **The indifference of the religious (v4 -6).** The religious men knew the scriptures that spoke of the birth of the Messiah, but when they were told about the star that spoke of the birth of a new king, they did not go to see him, unlike the shepherds. Even Herod made the connection, but the religious men could not be bothered to travel six miles to find out whether this was the long-awaited Messiah who had

been chosen by God for their deliverance. These men knew the facts about Messiah and could quote the scriptures relating to him, but they did not care about the implications. Their religion was more important to them than the Messiah himself. They were completely indifferent.

How sad it is when our religious traditions take the place of the one spoken about in those traditions, and when we are more concerned to keep the status quo in our worship rather than pursue the one whom we claim to worship with all out heart, mind and strength.

- That indifference is a sin.

We see this at Christmas when churches are crowded. People hear the readings and sing the carols, but they will not seek out Jesus to worship him.

**The Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of the most excellent worship just for who he is:
Creator God, sustainer of all things and redeemer of his people.**

He is the ultimate reality and beauty in the universe.

If you are a Christian, it is only because Christ is your redeemer. Without him, you would be eternally lost. How can any of us be indifferent to him, especially when we know the facts about him and can quote the scriptures concerning him?

**We need to cry out to God to spare us from indifference towards Christ as we become
so caught up in tradition.**

**We were created to worship God and we are called to come into his presence with
singing (Ps 100)**

We must not fall into the hostility of Herod or the indifference of the religious

3. The worship of the wise (v11). Those who should have responded to Jesus with worship did not do so. Instead, it is pagan gentiles who are given the sign in the sky that Messiah has been born, and who make the 900 mile journey to worship him and to announce his birth to his own people. They saw the child with his mother, Mary.

**Remarkably, these pagan gentiles responded in the only right way there is to respond to
Jesus.**

They bowed down and worshiped.

The remarkable actions of these wise men show us three important truths.

a) **Human wisdom will always fail us.** These men were the intellectual elite of their day and could read the stars and draw out implications. However, their human wisdom was not enough to lead them to Jesus. Only when they heard the scriptures did they know where to find Jesus (vv5-6)

Paul tells us: **Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?** ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:20-21)

It was the word of God that led the wise men to Jesus.

Human wisdom is never enough to lead us to Christ.

b) **God graciously leads us to Christ.** According to God's law, the arts used by these men (magic, astrology and interpretation of dreams) were all forbidden. These men were lawbreakers. They were also pagan gentiles from outside the covenant people of God. Yet they were the ones who found the way to Christ, while those who were his covenant people and claimed to follow God's law did not.

This came about because God led the wise men. The star they saw in their homeland did not lead them to Israel, but it did lead them to the place where Jesus was (vv9-10). The wise men were outsiders but by his grace God was at work to lead them to his Son.

If God had not graciously intervened, they would have died as pagans.

The same is true for you.

The glory in all scripture, including this passage, is the glory of God's grace to sinners.

God alone gets the glory.

c) **True worship must be costly and extravagant.** The wise men presented costly gifts, and that giving of gifts was part of their worship. We tend to think that singing is our worship, but the Bible shows us that worship is much more than that. It includes singing but

Worship is the whole of our lives, with everything wholly given over to Christ
We use our voices and our gifting, and give our money and our time, all to the praise
and glory of Christ

There is no room in God's kingdom for stingy measured worship that costs us little. All that we have is not our own – it belongs to Christ.

We are not the rulers of our own lives – Jesus Christ is the ruler of our life

There is no room for stingy measured worship because we worship a Saviour who gave everything to redeem us.

- Jesus Christ gave up the splendour of heaven to come and live in poverty on earth
- Jesus Christ gave up the worship of angels who delighted in him to be mocked by his enemies
- Jesus Christ gave up his life to death on a cross to redeem us from sin

The last verse of the hymn When I survey the wondrous cross sums it up:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all

So often we are like Herod and the chief priests, and we react with hostility and indifference. The wise men were pagan gentiles who, by God's grace, were led to Christ and so responded with extravagant sacrificial worship.

Do not let the traditions of Christmas nativity that are not found in the Bible keep you from truly knowing and seeing Christ, but instead allow Christmas to be shaped by what God reveals about himself and his Son in his word and then you will truly come to worship as the wise men did.

Plead with God to reveal more of Christ to you, and to open your eyes to the wonder and beauty of your Saviour.

The only way to get to that place of extravagant sacrificial worship is through a deeper knowledge of Christ.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,

and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him; bless his name!

For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations

(Psalm 100)