

10 December 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Drs André & Nanda Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Hymn: CH4 96 You are before me Lord

READING

Matthew 2.1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

“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.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they

saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

MESSAGE

Last Sunday we all listened to the moderator's service, where he spoke about epiphany, and mentioned the journey the 3 wise men took a while after Jesus was born to meet the new king...

So André and I decided that we would like to pause here for a moment this Sunday, because there is so much we can learn from this story, from the journey the wise men undertook...

See, we are all on a journey, a journey called life. And seeing that none of us are able to go on actual journeys at the moment, this is the ideal opportunity to stand still for a while and reflect on where we are heading...

But before we do this, let's take a look at the context of our reading:

The wise men or Magi were astrologers, who played a prominent part in court life in many Eastern states, as advisers to kings. Their insights were derived from sophisticated astronomical observation combined with the sort of 'interpretation' which present-day horoscopes provide. By such calculations made in the East (probably Mesopotamia, modern Iraq) they had concluded that an important royal birth had taken place in Israel, which called for a "state visit".

It is only later that we read that the “star” moved. They saw the star hanging over Israel. They went to Herod because he was the rightful king. It was only logical that he would know of the royal birth. Herod was taken aback for he was the ONLY rightful king of the Jews. No wonder he was upset to learn that there was “another KING born somewhere”.

He also knew that to his disadvantage was the fact that he was only a half Jew from Edom which was a real thorn in his flesh. The Edomites were enemies of the Israelites. And for this reason, the Jews did not consider Herod as their rightful king. They were forced by the Roman authorities to accept him as their king.

As he grew older, he became increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous sons, wives, and others close to him put to death just because he suspected them to be revolutionaries wanting to overthrow his ruling power!

No wonder Matthew is telling us that Herod and the whole Jerusalem were troubled and terrified by this terrible news. Herod would not take it. The Jews in Jerusalem knew trouble was on the way. They knew his cruelties and murderous killings. He immediately summons his advisors to tell him if there is any indication somewhere of the birth of the Messiah. His advisors were the “chief priests” who headed the twenty-four main orders of priests who lived in and around the city and the scribes or the “teachers of the law”. They had inherited the ancient profession of copying Scripture, but they had evolved into a class of teachers well trained in interpreting and applying the Old Testament as well.

It seems that Herod knew about the expectations of a coming Messiah. They quote Micah chapter 5 that said it would all happen in Bethlehem, 5 miles south from Jerusalem.

Then his slyness comes to the fore when he meets up again with the wise men in secret telling them to go and find out exactly where the Messiah is so that he also can go and pay his respects.

As the wise men approached Bethlehem, they saw the star leading them onwards to the stable where Jesus was born. They brought his gifts as a sign of respect. These gifts were exactly the ones that were used in those days to honour a new king.

All three gifts honour Jesus as King. Gold, then as now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift.

Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. Similar visits of Magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time.

And then the surprising turning point in this story: God reveals himself to these pagans in a dream warning them not to go to Herod, which they obeyed!

The wise men went on a journey to find the new-born king. They got lost along the way, and had to ask for directions.

But in the end they reached their destination, and meeting Jesus changed their lives forever. All of a sudden they knew exactly what to do and where to go.

We are finding ourselves at the start of a new year. A year that started with just as much uncertainty as the previous year ended with.

We are finding ourselves in lockdown again. With the hope of the vaccine changing things for the better, but at the same time with a new strain of the virus causing fear and anxiety.

The thing is though – lockdown might mean that we are locked *in* in our houses, and many of our loved ones might be locked *out* of our houses, but there is no such a thing as a *lockdown on life*.

We might not be going anywhere at the moment, but that doesn't mean that we've stopped journeying through life.

So, as always, at the start of this new year, we need to decide what we would like our journey to be like.

There are so many things out of our control at the moment. We don't know when we will be able to start travelling again, we don't know what the road ahead looks like, but ultimately – these things are not important.

The only thing that is really important, is WHO we are journeying with. That is what makes all the difference.

If you think back for a minute on all the fun and memorable journeys you've had through your life – what is the thing you remember best? For me it is most certainly the people I enjoyed the journey with.

And now I know there might be quite a few of you thinking: “Yeah right, but I am locked in my own house with only my own company, and it’s been like this for such a long time, and will stay like this for who knows how long, so nothing memorable there...”

And you are right – this journey we are on at the moment is extremely hard, even more so if you have to do it in isolation, on your own...

But today I don’t want to talk about the family and friends that make our journeys special – I want to talk about the One, the only One who can truly make our journey through life worthwhile, and that is God.

Once the wise men met God in Jesus, their lives changed forever. They continued their journey on “another” road, the right road.

If you have God by your side, it doesn’t really matter how easy or difficult your journey is – whether you are skipping along with a song in your heart, or whether you are dragging your feet, struggling to find the energy to move forward at all. Whether your path is straight and easy, or whether it is slippery underfoot with lots of obstacles in your way.

Whether you are excited at the dawn of a new day, or feel hopeless all the time – with God alongside you, you will be okay.

Because God will make you surefooted as a deer. It never ceases to amaze me how deer can walk on dangerous cliffs without falling. And that is exactly what it will be like for you if God is your travel companion in 2021.

You'll still not know what lies around the corner; Covid19, the uncertainty around Brexit, your own personal tribulations still might not make any sense to you at all; BUT you will know that you are not alone. That although it might not be easy travelling, you are on the RIGHT road, and ultimately, that's the only thing that's important.

May we all go forward from this moment, never ceasing to celebrate the One who loves us so much that He will never let go of our hands...

Amen

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we kneel at your feet;
the Christ, the anointed king,
who rules by love and conquers by dying.
We worship you.

We bring frankincense:
and pray that our lives may be given as fragrant offerings.

We bring myrrh:
our willingness daily to die to ourselves.

We bring gold:
all that we have, which came from you
and is available for your service.

In this new year Lord,
Please be close to all those who need you.

In the quietness of our hearts, we bring before you now those known and loved by us, who need you now more than ever...

Bless them, and all of us Lord
Lord Jesus, we kneel at your feet;
the Christ, the anointed king,
who rules by love and conquers by dying.
We worship you.
Amen

HYMN

CH4 96

You are before me, Lord, You are behind.
And over me You have spread out Your hand;
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
Too high to grasp, too great to understand.

Then from Your Spirit where, Lord, shall I go;
And from Your presence where, Lord, shall I fly?
If I ascend to heaven You are there,
and still are with me if in hell I lie.

If I should take my flight into the dawn,
If I should dwell on ocean's farthest shore,
Your mighty hand will rest upon me still,
And Your right hand will guard me evermore.

If I should say, "Let darkness cover me,
And I shall hide within the veil of night,"
Surely the darkness is not dark to You;
The night is as the day, the darkness light.

Search me, O God, search me and know my heart;
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
Keep me from any path that gives You pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way.