

# ORDINARY HEROES

## The Magi

If you were God, how would you make yourself known? When we look at Christmas cards we may get some idea of how we think God made himself known! The sorts of things you see on Christmas cards include snow, robins, glitter, a serene stable with clean animals and a beautiful starlight sky. All nice and lovely, but probably not anywhere near the truth of what really happened.

It's certainly not how Luke tells the story. Mary is greatly troubled at the appearance of an angel. When was the last time you were greatly troubled? Perhaps another way of asking the question is to ask: 'When were you last truly afraid?'

Perhaps as the angel tells Mary about the baby she will bear, she is troubled for many reasons. She is a virgin – how will this be? She is troubled by the thought of the shame this will bring on her Jewish family. The punishment of the law for a pregnancy outside of marriage was death by stoning! It was a law probably no longer practised by Mary's time, but just the thought of it...

Mathew records that Joseph thought it best to divorce Mary even before they were married! A tragic family break-up even before they became a family. God, it seems, wants to make an entrance into the world that might appear a bit of a mess, and then trust himself, and the fate of the world, to what were most probably, two Jewish teenagers!

Mathew records the entrance of God into the world this way:

### The Magi Visit the Messiah

**2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> ““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.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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.”

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Mathew 2 v 1-12)

Mathew, it seems, wants to tell us something important about the mess. When the Magi turn up at Herod’s palace in Jerusalem asking where the King of the Jews is, Herod wants to find out where Jesus will be born. So he calls together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law to ask them.

They replied with the prophecy from The Old Testament:

<sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> ““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.” (Mathew 2 v 5 & 5)

By telling the story his way, Mathew is making a really important point by quoting this prophecy from Micah: He is saying: This is that! This birth of a Messiah, is that prophecy being made real. Another way of saying that might be this: ‘Oh, by the way, what is happening right now is that God is at work in the mess.’ As God promised and has continued to promise, he is at work in

what seems to be a bit of a mess. God is at work now, and in the way he promised!

This is a powerful reminder that God has a history with his people and that he is still at work in the here and now. God has a history with his people. Micah prophesied some 700 years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Even then God was at work in the mess. And his message was that, however his people lived, he would go on loving them and not give up on them!

Mathew tells us: You know the God who was active all the way back then, well he is active, here and now, and that's because he loves his people, because he loves them, because he loves them, because he loves them...

Here's a question for you, here and now, today: Do you believe what Mathew wanted to say about God? Another way of asking that question might be this: 'Do you believe the story Mathew is telling – that the birth of Jesus was God keeping his promise?'

If you answer yes to those questions, here's another one for you to consider. Is it possible that the God who has a history with his people, and who was at work in the mess of the Christmas story, is still at work in the mess today? Because he still loves his people? And could that mean that God is at work in your mess and mine?

My best guess is that you might say: You and God have a history together; you have decided to put your trust in him and live as best you can in the light of what you know about him. Perhaps then, what Mathew tells in his story is true for your story and mine. God has been at work; God is at work; God will be at work... in the mess!

Mathew reminds us that it is sometimes difficult to recognise when God is at work and where he is at work. The Magi are sometimes called 'Wise Men.' Perhaps what happened is that they presumed in their 'wisdom' where a king would be born, and so they ended up in the wrong place. The consequence of their visit to a palace was one huge mess. In his anger Herod gave an order that all baby boys under 2 should be killed!

Perhaps, sadly, fully recognising human nature and the evil of the heart, that too is prophesied. Sometimes, we, by our choices, our pride, our pursuit for our own power and status, in order to protect and build our own kingdoms, create a mess! Mathew wants to tell us and remind us, that God is at work in the mess. Perhaps, in one area of your life or another, you might feel it's a bit of a mess. Mathew wants us to know that God comes to us – in the mess. And, maybe God will come to you, again, this Christmas.

We like to say the Magi followed a star. There are various ways of understanding how this happened, but perhaps what is most important, is that, having decided what its appearance meant, they set out on a journey. And perhaps that is where we most closely identify with these Magi: we too are on a journey. A good question to ask is simply this: 'Where is our journey taking us?'

There is much speculation about who these Magi were and where they were from. Most likely they were astrologers of some kind, from modern day Iraq. What we do know, is that whatever they saw that is described as a star, they understood it to be very important. So important in fact that they would embark on a journey of, perhaps 1,000 miles, which would take some considerable time (a few months at least) across dangerous terrain!

Which begs the question. Why would they do that? One writer suggests they understood that this child to be born, both represented hope and offered them a better future. Perhaps it would be true to say that the Magi, these wise men, respected and learned people in their communities, were searching for something, searching for something bigger and better than what they knew.

Seems to me that God meets them in that searching and he does so because that's the kind of thing God does. Interestingly God meets them first in the natural world – they are astrologers - who study God's world!

It's not how they understand what they are doing. Maybe they understood it later. Seems to me God still does that today: people are searching, searching for something bigger and better than themselves, and God is able to meet them in their searching.

Paul writes it this way:

The reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is. By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can see; eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of the divine being. (Romans 1 v 19-20 Message version)

I'm wondering where God might meet you in your searching? It seems that God wants to be found: why else would he send a star to astrologers? And God wants to be found by you!

The journey may be long and hard. It may be a struggle We may take some wrong turns along the way, but God wants to be found. That is the point of Mathew's story!

The Magi assumed a king would be born in the capital city, Jerusalem. They were unfamiliar with the prophecy that told of Jesus birth in Bethlehem. Their own wisdom would only take them so far on this journey – for the rest they needed God's word!

That is still true for us here and now. God is able, and does, meet us in many ways, but he most perfectly meets us in the Bible. In our searching on our journey, to engage with the word of God is vital and life giving. The challenge may be this: wherever you are on your journey of faith, whatever you face, whatever the challenge, whatever your circumstances, God wants to meet and guide you through the gift of his word.

The way Mathew writes about the Magi, he makes it clear that they are Gentiles! Don't you love that? Don't you just love that? Everyone is welcome in the kingdom of the heavens! Mathew is telling the story that those considered by 'the people of God' to be outside of God's purpose are in fact those who show an openness to God and eagerly receive him when they find him!

Babylonian astrologers, the wrong sorts of people, open to God's leading and ready to worship him. God's bigger, better and inclusive story. In their searching the Magi find Jesus. This is an epiphany for them all. An epiphany might be understood as a sudden profound understanding. Whatever they

thought, when they met Jesus they were changed: they simply but profoundly, bowed down and worshipped him. They offered him their gifts – perhaps most simply understood as the best they had to offer. What a beautiful, powerful picture: at the end of a long journey, these wise men from Babylon, kneel down and give the best they have to offer with an open heart of worship.

What will you do when God meets you?

What is challenging is that the religious people in Jerusalem, the ones who did know about the prophecy that the king was to be born in Bethlehem, they never came to find him, they never came to worship him. Yet you would have thought they would be the ones who would have known better. They perhaps, would have been overjoyed with this birth. They, perhaps, would have bowed their knees in worship and they, perhaps, who would have offered their gifts – brought the best they had to offer.

Truth is, whoever we are, wherever we come from, whatever our journey, and wherever we are on that journey – we all have a choice, and perhaps the choice is this: we can close our heart and our eyes to the possibilities that God is at work, here today, in the mess, and the truth that God wants to be found by us, where we are today.

Or, we can, like the Magi, open our hearts and our eyes enough to see that something bigger and better is at work in the world, and our lives, and have the courage to follow wherever that leads us, and to open our hearts to worship the God who come to us. Like all ordinary people – you get to choose....

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2019, by Rev. Ian Phillips.