

## Sermon for Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019 8.30am and 10am

### **Texts:-**

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**Theme:- We worship Jesus - King, high priest and Saviour of the world**

### **Prayer**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever pleasing in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

*Amen*

### **Introduction**

**The door flew open and Beryl dashed into the room:-**

***'Everyone – do come – your really have got to come and see for yourselves – you'll be sorry if you don't!'***

**Whatever was going on?**

**It was one evening in March last year when I was staying at The Quaker Guest House in Grasmere, Cumbria with members of Bebington Rambling Club on a club walking holiday.**

We had been walking during the day and had just enjoyed a lovely dinner and a number of us were relaxing in the lounge. Some of our group had gone out for a late night stroll before bed – Beryl was one of their number.

Somewhat startled we asked 'Look at what? Whatever are you talking about? Explain!'

'It's the stars' Beryl replied 'You simply have to come and look – they are so wonderful!'

OK – I somewhat reluctantly prised myself out of my comfy armchair and looked around for my anorack and trailed outside after Beryl.

Well I expect a number of you will have witnessed a beautiful night sky when staying in the country or on holiday abroad somewhere. It is so different seeing the night sky away from street lights and general light pollution.....

Beryl was right! The guest house lies in a bit of a dip surrounded by mountains and is a little way from Grasmere village down a country lane. There were no lights to detract from our view and the night sky was certainly a wonder to behold! The bright stars twinkled in the black sky – like diamonds on velvet – they surrounded us above in all their glory. I am not generally a fan of digital wizardry but have to confess that, in this case, it made the experience all the more spectacular. Beryl had an app on her phone which gave the pictorial geography of all the star constellations. Holding up her phone we could make out exactly things like:- the plough...etc It was truly a humbling and dazzling sight and I am so glad that I didn't elect to stay in the warm and miss it!

Needless to say - I stayed outside for some time gazing at the sight – 'Lost in wonder, love and praise!'

We then all bounced back into the guest house fizzing with excitement and berating the sluggards who had stayed within!

**So how much more exciting must it have been for those wise men who followed the star to find the baby Jesus 2 thousand years ago?**

**To set it into context:-**

- In Biblical times the night sky – on a clear night – would have always presented the sort of spectacle which I was privy to!
- Scholars would regularly study the night sky as they believed that they could tell the future from the stars..

In our Gospel reading we are told that ‘wise men from the east’ came to Jerusalem enquiring of King Herod where they might find the ‘newly born King of the Jews’ because they had been informed of his birth by reading the heavens and interpreting the meaning of a certain star.

If this account all sounds a bit low key – I think that it is anything it is anything but!

**Did any of you see the TV programme just before Christmas ‘Under the Christmas Sky’ ?**

Chris Packham and Michaela Strachan went in search of nature’s celestial wonders.

One of the things which they did was to retrace the steps of the Biblical wise men/Magi to the spot in the desert where they are reputed to have seen the Star of Bethlehem to test out what may be the truth of the matter.

One suggestion has been that the Magi may have seen Halley’s comet which was seen shooting visibly across the skies in 11 BC but this would be very early for this story.

It would have been much more likely to have been some kind of ‘supernova’ when the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in

conjunction with each other. In other words they were positioned one behind the other giving the appearance of a much brighter star. Since Jupiter was known as the ‘royal’ or kingly planet and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews then it is clear that it could be foretelling the birth of a new King of the Jews!

In the TV programme Chris and Michaela gamely travelled for a day by camel in the desert, and camped under the stars (much to their discomfort) to arrive at the spot where the time was right to witness a conjunction of planets.

They were successful in this and concluded that the Star of Bethlehem could well have been a true event!

They also made the point that the Magi would have made an epic journey to follow the star; - they came from Persia (modern day Iran) and it is estimated it would have taken them 6 months to complete the journey by camel!

**They clearly meant business then!**

Taken in context this story is not so strange as it may seem to us now. Seemingly, just about the time that Jesus was born, there was in the world an expectation of the coming of a king. Even the Roman historians knew about this.

Various writers of the time echoed this belief:-Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, Tirades to name some...

So – as the world was in expectant mode it is not so surprising that scholars/astronomers of the time, were on the look out for likely signs and would be prepared to go to great lengths to follow them up.

**But who were the ‘Magi’?**

I expect that many of you came to the nativity service here at Christ church

I came and it was wonderful – the children told the Christmas story to a packed church.

I always feel that the nativity service is the main start of our Christmas celebrations.

In the service three kings followed the star to find the baby Jesus...

Traditionally we sing in our carols about ‘three kings’ but in fact the Bible doesn’t tell us how many there were or, indeed, if they were, in fact, kings.

The name given to the wise men who came to visit is *Magi* which is a word difficult to translate. It seems that they were likely to come from a tribe of priests becoming the teachers and instructors of the Persian king. They became men of holiness and wisdom. These Magi were men who were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science and were generally known as soothsayers and interpreters of dreams.

In early accounts, tradition had it, that there were twelve wise men, but the later tradition that this was reduced to only three is almost universal. Probably because of the threefold gifts which they brought to the baby Jesus.

Later legends made them kings and still later legend gave them names;- Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Melchior is reputed to have brought the gift of gold

Caspar is reputed to have given the gift of frankincense

Balthasar the gift of myrrh

We can never be certain if these later traditions are right. However it is important to know that the general story of wise men following a star to find the baby Jesus and worship him is very likely based on fact.

From very early times the gifts which the wise men brought have been seen as particularly fitting:

#### ***Gold is the gift of a king***

It was the custom in those days that no one could approach the king without a gift – Gold was an appropriate gift for a king - so Jesus was seen to be ‘The man born to be King’

We do well to remember today that Jesus Christ is king and that we approach him with due humility and deference.

#### ***Frankincense is the gift for a priest***

The sweet perfume of frankincense was used in Temple worship and sacrifice.

The function of a priest is to open the way to God for all. The Latin name for priest is *pontifex* which means a *bridge-builder*. That is what Jesus did – he opened the way to God for all humanity.

#### ***Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die***

Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead.

Jesus came into the world to live for men and women and in the end to die for them.

#### **Gifts**

**Gold** for a king, **frankincense** for a priest, **myrrh** for one who is to die – these were the gifts of the wise men – so – even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true

king, the perfect high priest and in the end the supreme Saviour of the world.

Having left these gifts and worshipped the Christ child the Magi went home, very wisely by another route, having been warned in a dream that King Herod had murderous intentions.

(Personally, I have always thought it a bit naïve for the Magi to confide in King Herod in the first place! He was never going to be happy to learn that a possible usurper to his throne had been born!)

### **The Three Kings/Magi**

And so the Magi climb back on their camels and begin the long trek home and out of the story.

Yet they have left their mark:-

- They demonstrated complete conviction of the identity of Jesus – can we too show that conviction?
- They obviously planned their journey – 6 months long across the desert, probably enduring hardships along the way – can we be so persistent in our faith?
- They brought appropriate gifts – I wonder, what can we bring to Jesus?
- They accepted the unusual features of the birth of Jesus – surely they couldn't have expected a future king to be born in a stable? Do we accept the humble beginnings of Jesus too?

### **Conclusion**

I think that our challenge today is to follow the example of the Magi;-

- To grasp the identity of Jesus
- To be persistent in our faith
- To accept that Jesus was born human as well as divine and shared a humble life with an ordinary family rather than the pomp and circumstance of a royal household
- To offer Christ appropriate gifts

### **What can we bring to Jesus?**

In the words of that lovely carol:- *In the Bleak Midwinter-*

**The last verse concludes:-**

*What can I give him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man  
I would play my part,  
Yet what I can I give him:  
Give my heart'*

**Amen**