

Epiphany 2020

Eph 3:1-12/Matt2:1-12

Today we mark Epiphany, that is the revelation of Jesus's Kingship through the visit of the Magi or wise men from the East. Now it is possible to get very bogged down in different theories about where exactly the wise men came from and how old Jesus was. In fact these things are not especially relevant but for my money, following the narrative in Matthew I would agree with those who say that East from Israel was Arabia, and certainly Gold was mined in Arabia and Frankincense and Myrrh were harvested from trees that only grew in Southern Arabia. There are various other texts that support this theory. As to how old Jesus was, well following the Matthew narrative probably only a few days. Matthew does not include the story of Jesus being taken to the temple and recognised by Simeon and Anna as the promised Messiah, but Luke tells us that this was at the time of their purification which would have been 40 days after Mary had given birth. It makes sense that the exile in Egypt was only short, time to get away from the atrocities that Herod committed, but Herod died almost immediately so they would have been able to return after around about a month, in good time to take Mary and Jesus to the temple and then return home to Nazareth. As I said there are other theories, but these are not the details we need to focus on today.

From next week we are going to spend some time looking at some of the Parables that Jesus told. Now parables are prophetic in nature as well as instructive. Jesus used the things people could see around them, things they understood well to tell the parables, a vineyard, a wheat field, sheep and goats etc. But they were more than just obvious stories, they were about the Kingdom of God.

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Throughout the Bible we find prophecies that are illustrated by ordinary things, or things that people knew about and in the both/and nature of the Kingdom of God most prophecies were both for the people at the time and also for the future. So we see for example Jeremiah watching the potter, who does not just throw away the clay when a pot goes wrong, but he re-moulds it and makes it good again and this was both an illustration for the people of Israel at the time, that God wanted to renew them but also a prophetic vision for the future for the way that God does not give up on us when we sin, but is able to renew us, remould us in His image. Sometimes there are prophetic acts such as God telling Hosea to marry an adulterous woman to symbolise the infidelity of the people of Israel and God's redeeming faithfulness.

What does all of this have to do with the wise men from the East? Well in a sense they themselves were a sort of prophetic act - gentiles included in the incredible events of the nativity, worshipping the newborn Messiah alongside or at least shortly after Jewish shepherds. They were in themselves a prophetic sign that the Kingdom is for gentiles as well as Jews. You could extend that and say that the wealthy are not excluded, even though it may sometimes be harder for them to find the Kingdom, if they are too much distracted by their earthly treasure. And of course their coming itself we call Epiphany which means revelation- it was revealed to them that this King of the Jews was to be born and they in turn revealed Him to the world by their coming to Him. And then there were the gifts that they bought. On one level just the sort of gifts that wealthy wise men would bring any significant person. Precious gold, always a good present to receive, perhaps especially

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for a family that would soon need to take refuge in a foreign land. But gold is also a symbol of Kingship on earth. This baby was born a King, declared so by the prophetic gift of Gold. Frankincense is an incense used to worship God, again a useful practical gift for a Jewish family, but also symbolic of deity and prophetically proclaiming that Jesus was not just a King on earth but is in fact God incarnate. Finally myrrh; myrrh has many uses, especially medicinal as it has antiseptic properties - again an expensive but very useful gift. However myrrh was also used as an embalming oil and is therefore symbolic of death. This was a very special time, these were extraordinary visitors bringing expensive and prophetic gifts, important gentiles playing their part in the unfolding revelation of exactly who this child was. But at the same time God was using physical things to signify prophetic and spiritual reality.

I hope that as we study the parables, you will see how Jesus continued this tradition of revealing spiritual reality through ordinary physical things. And I hope too that you will come to understand that we too are called to live prophetic lives. The way that we live our lives, the things that we do, specifically when we are living in obedience to God's word, and especially when we are using the gifts that He has given us to serve others, these things can be and often are prophetic acts. An act of kindness, or hospitality is on the surface, just that, someone being kind or hospitable, but it can also signify, be symbolic of the hospitality of the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom that welcomes and offers the hospitality of heaven itself to all those who want to enter it. An act of generosity is just that, giving something to someone who needs it, but it can also signify, symbolise the generosity of our God who knows our needs

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and generously provides for us. You get the picture. Some people have a gift of prophecy, they speak out the words that God wants a person or a group of people to hear. But I believe that God can and does use any and all of us in prophetic ways if we are willing to be used, and sometimes even when we are not. There is so much more to life and to living than just the physical things we see around us. There is mystery and wonder and an eternal spiritual realm that as Christians we belong to as much as, if not more than we belong to this physical temporal realm. Of course you can choose, even as a Christian, just to experience the physical and temporal. But if you want more of the fullness of life that Jesus said He came to give us, then we need to pray that He will open our spiritual ears and eyes and teach us to see things as He sees them and as we learn to do that then We will understand so much more, our faith will deepen and it will become more solid and real. And whether we are shepherds or wise men, rich or poor, life will certainly be more exciting!