

December 23, 2019 The Wisdom Of The Wise Matthew 2:1-12

We are on the very brink of Christmas 2019. In all honesty we need to recognize some very basic facts. First: for 1986 years people have been celebrating at this time or around this time of the year...in the bleak mid winter...the birth of Jesus who is the Christ. Second: we do not know with what we are tempted to call modern precision, the exact date of Jesus birth for the simple reason, calendars as we now know calendars, clocks as we now know clocks did not exist. There was no precise recording of that birth in Bethlehem. Third: the Church arrived at this time of the year, December 25th, based on legend and the best calculations possible after the creation of a “common” calendar. Fourth: the great census of Augustus Caesar locates the season in a general sense. As Luke reminds us, it was during that singular event that Joseph gathered himself, Mary, who was expecting her first child, and enough money to pay the tax that was behind the reason for the census, and made the trip to Bethlehem, where she came to term and Jesus was born. That we celebrate Jesus birthday at all, is a recognition of some fundamental measure of faith in HIM and the difference HE has made to life and culture in general. So I personally arrive at what I call number five: the Jesus fact. Christmas, and I will say the same at Easter, are providers of time and place markers that the world is unable to deny the reality of Jesus coming into the world, born of a woman, and changing people, and therefore the world for the

better. We care, as once the world did not care, about the poor, the sick, the homeless, the helpless, and children, and women, because Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

This morning we turn to the part played in that birth by a group of men, tradition says they were three in number, (and there are legends that are not insignificant about that) but for the record, the Gospel of Matthew does not assign a number to them, only that they made a long, difficult and dangerous trip in search of the one born to be King of the Jews, and they found HIM in Bethlehem. The journey of the Magi. Kings in their own right, who came from the East. They came to see a baby with their own eyes. They came in caravan. They came with the flocks that provided food for the journey. They came with attendants and security forces. They may have come with their families in tow. And they came bearing gifts which gave birth to our Christmas traditions of giving gifts to loved ones, friends and even strangers. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Matthew chapter 2 begins with a very significant word, and that word is “after”. It was “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, during the time of King Herod,” that the Magi, whom we have traditionally called the Wise Men, arrived in Jerusalem creating a stir. Matthew has told us in the clearest way possible that the Wise Men were not present when Jesus was born, and not present at the stable, but in fact finding the holy family dwelling in a house in Bethlehem. I have no interest

in destroying those images of church pageants, and nativity sets that permit us to put all the characters in place at one time, the angels hovering, the shepherds, gazing in wonder, the Wise Men in their fine expensive robes presenting their treasures (gifts that were expensive), gifts that had great significance, gifts that underline the utter necessity they felt (yes, emotion) about making this journey to bow down and worship this precious, precious baby, who would become Jesus of Nazareth, who turned water into wine at a wedding, who walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, who healed the blind and cast demons out of the demented, who died on a cross at a place called Golgotha, or Calvary in Greek, and who rose again the 3rd day, on Sunday morning.

And it is not an afterthought that brings them to Bethlehem. There is genuine significance to their journey, to their search and their finding of Jesus. They had no intention of creating a stir in Jerusalem. They had no idea what the consequences of their question would be, “Where is the one who is born King of the Jews?” They came seeking. They asked assuming that an event of such great importance would not have gone unnoticed in Jerusalem, or at the courts of Herod, that fox, that butcher. But Matthew tells us their coming brought to light a reminder of what the prophets had said about the Messiah. He would be born in Bethlehem, (in fact , because there were more than one Bethlehems at the time, Bethlehem Ephratha (in the fruit growing region. The Bethlehem that has survived all of the events of time and

history that have seen other cities destroyed and lost, reduced to dust and piles of rock.

So what Matthew tells us is not only the story of the Wise Men and their following a star, but he tells us they found the child and gave their gifts, and worshipped HIM because of the teaching of the Old Testament, the words of the prophet Micah, which in our time are found in what we call chapter 5 and verse 2. The Biblical word exposes us to Jesus and reveals HIM to us. The Biblical word exposed Jesus to the Wise Men, and revealed HIM to them, and of course it exposed Jesus to Herod, and revealed the city in which that baby might be found. And when Herod asked the Wise Men when they first saw the star that marked this birth he was zeroing in on an age range, for the babies that would be slaughtered in Bethlehem in an effort to kill one born to shepherd HIS people Israel.

Christmas does this for us and to us. It causes us to focus attention, our attention on the Biblical word to know as much as we may know about the One who saves us from our sin. In doing so it reminds us, it underlines that wisdom and being wise has to do first and last with a pursuit of what God has revealed and made known to us. In fact we only really begin to grasp who we are, as we grasp whose we are. We are the children of God, followers of the Christ, disciples of Jesus. As a result some of our sins become clear to us. And we begin to discern that like the Wise Men, the Magi, we are on a journey, and it is not easy, nor is it without its perils. But having

been found by Jesus, we discover we must serve HIM, and that we must care for people who need us and our gifts and talents, and even the stranger may be defined as our neighbour for whom we have a responsibility to be caring and helping.

One can never speak of the Wise Men without speaking of their finding the child and his mother Mary in the house that had become home away from home. The star led them once again, which is to say the exercise of faith was part of this journey to the last moment of it. And when they found the child Jesus (somewhere between 1 and 2 years old, they worshipped HIM. They approached Him on their knees. Second to that first priority, and that is a lesson in and of itself, they “opened their treasures and presented HIM with gifts,” expensive gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold was given in recognition of HIS being born to be King. “Incense owns a deity nigh,” proclaims the carol. Frankincense with its pungent odor, its aromatic smoke rising up, was a reminder of the presence of God. That is why they worshipped Jesus the child. That is why in Orthodox and Roman Catholic worship incense is often used. And of course myrrh. Myrrh is a bitter herb. It foreshadows the suffering that Jesus would have to bare. Myrrh may indeed have been one of those spices that anointed his body before it was placed in the tomb.

The key in all of this is that we should notice, underline and act. If we are to be wise, we make it a major part

of our journey to seek and find and worship and serve and follow the one who is Jesus, the Christ.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus receive the worship we render to you. Use us in service as you will, and not according to our own wills. Grant that faith might mean we will see you face to face. In your name we pray. Amen