

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Gospel of the Lord.

SERMON

This morning we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany.

We have just completed a season of waiting and preparing ourselves for the coming of God's light into the world.

Epiphany brings us the appearance of the divine.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a frightened King Herod searching for a child.

Herod had reigned as King in Palestine for nearly forty years and was the only ruler in Palestine ever to have kept peace and stability in that region.

He was a man of vision, but he was also a tyrant, a paranoid and brutal leader who murdered his own family members and who easily felt threatened by anyone attempting to claim his power.

So when the three visitors from the East arrive looking for the King of the Jews, we can just imagine King Herod's reaction. There's only one King of the Jews! No one is taking that title away from Herod! So, in his anger and fear, he decides to order the execution of all male children under two years old in the area of Bethlehem, leaving a trail of slaughter and young mothers weeping hopelessly.

This world of King Herod is the world into which Jesus is born.

The very thought of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, made him angry. He rejected any notion that another person could have power and dominion over him.

And it is not so unusual for the mention of the name 'Jesus' to make people angry.

Have you ever mentioned Jesus in a conversation and been surprised by the reaction you got? Maybe it was dismissive, maybe you were made to feel like you said something politically incorrect, or maybe sometimes you felt hostility? And, often, that hostility and anger stems from a bad experience of church or Christians in the past, which then gets projected onto their view of Jesus.

For us too, maybe there have been occasions in our own lives when we have felt angry at Jesus. Perhaps when events in our lives have taken a turn for the worse, when someone we love has become seriously ill or died. Sometimes, the pain in our lives has been so intense that we have doubted our experience of God and maybe have rejected the very idea of faith in him.

But this rejection is part of our journey of faith that we all must go through as we move and grow into a deeper experience of God as Christians.

The story of the visitors from the East is a four-part journey: from the head to the heart.

First, they study the facts. Their journey of faith begins with them asking questions. They are astrologers – they study the

stars - and when they see a strange star in the sky, they ask themselves questions about it.

Second, they know that the only way to get an answer is to set out on a journey. But that journey involves risk. They have to come to the court of the king and risk their lives to find out about Jesus. But their desire for truth is stronger than their fear.

Third, they come into the presence of Jesus and they worship. And part of their worship is to offer him gifts:

Gold, the traditional gift for a King, and here, for an infant King;

Frankincense, represents divinity, and one who offers frankincense bows in humility before the Christ-child;

and Myrrh, used to embalm the dead, reminds us of the things to come, that this child was born to suffer and die for us.

Finally, the wise men make their way back home; back to their everyday lives, not leaving Jesus behind, but taking the experience of their encounter with them deep in their hearts. So we hear in verse 12, that “having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” But maybe it was meeting the Christ-child that made them change their route.

And it's true for all of us that once we meet with Jesus, we do take another road, and life is never the same again. And it's true too, that it is under the guidance of God that our road is chosen for us.

So in the response of the wise men to Jesus, we see our very own journey of faith.

Starting with questions in our mind.

Setting out on a journey, which will inevitably involve risk and vulnerability. But a journey that leads us to the Christ-child, where we sacrifice to give him all the gifts that we have to offer.

And then God sends us out, inspiring us, and guiding us to a new journey with the experience of Christ in our hearts. The way of worship and adoration; the way God chooses for us.

And so, in this remarkable story, we find the most basic of Christian truths. Every one of us is confronted with the Christ-child this morning and we need to make a decision.

Will we be like King Herod, angry and rejecting Jesus?

Or will we be like the wise men from the East and step out on a journey of faith?

And we know that this is a difficult journey, filled with many questions and doubts, with many personal difficulties, and with much sacrifice - but a journey that leads to Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour. A journey that takes us on a new road; a new direction under God's guidance and within his grace and love and compassion.

Amen.