

Matthew 2:1-12

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 December 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] We all love babies, especially if we don't have to look after them, and we can enjoy them and then hand them back to whoever is responsible for their care.

Now, in Bon Accord, we're blessed to have a fairly steady stream of wee ones becoming part of our church family. Finally, last Sunday, young Will, William de la Haye, made his first appearance at church.

And I don't know if this is a sign of things to come, but very conveniently coinciding with a very tasty congregational Christmas lunch, his first appearance.

This lad is going places. Now, for many folks, and I was witnessing this from afar, this was the first opportunity to see young William.

And I imagine, though I have to say I didn't actually hear what was said, but I imagine it was the usual diet of, isn't he cute, and he's just like his dad, was that a smile, and so on and so forth.

[1 : 17] You know, the routine. As I say, I don't really know what folk were saying, but what I do know for a fact is what nobody did.

Nobody did what the Magi or the wise men did when they first saw baby Jesus. We read in Matthew's Gospel that they saw the child, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

They saw the child, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Now, to set out my stall from the beginning, my concern and purpose in preaching this sermon is to help bring us all to that same place, on our knees before King Jesus.

On your knees at Christmas. How does that sound? As a posture for Christmas. On your knees at Christmas.

On your knees, not crippled by your credit card bill following Panic Saturday, but on your knees as you are awestruck by the one born in Bethlehem.

[2 : 35] Some of you, perhaps, have never bowed the knee, and it's time that you did. Perhaps you've never been willing. Perhaps you never knew that you should or could.

Perhaps you don't understand why anyone would do such a bizarre thing. And, of course, there's another matter. Even if you did want to bow the knee before Jesus, how would you do that? Where would you find him? What does it even mean to bow the knee before Jesus? Well, let's think a little bit about what the wise men did, as we have it recorded for us here in Matthew's Gospel. What were the men actually doing? Before thinking about the meaning of it, the significance of it, what physically were they actually doing? Well, the verse states that they bowed down and worshipped him.

This is what they did. We read that there in verse 11. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

[3 : 50] The verb that's translated there, bowed down, literally means to fall. And the verb that is translated worship is also a reference to posture.

It means to crouch. And it came to be used of the bowing down or the prostration that would be appropriate in the context of worship.

And the picture then is of men on their knees, certainly, or possibly, we might even say, probably prostrate before the baby.

Now, I think by any measure that is unusual behavior. Well, so much for posture. But what does it mean? Why were they doing this? And the word that is found in our text that is key to this matter is the word worship.

They are worshiping Jesus. These wise men from the east, they are worshiping Jesus. What we have here described is more than a reverential bow before a monarch.

[4 : 53] It's more than a curtsy before the queen. It's more than an act of homage to a dignitary. It is worship. It is worship. The recognition and honor and praise that only God is worthy of receiving. That is what Matthew is describing for us. And just to give us a little bit of insight into this or to enrich a little our understanding, it might be helpful to consider a couple of other occasions when these two verbs, translated, bow down, and worship. These two same verbs are also used in conjunction in the New Testament.

We find it on more than a couple of occasions, but let's just notice a couple of occasions that I think can help us have an insight into what is involved or implied by the use of this language. If we turn to Matthew chapter 4 without need to go any further, the account of the temptation of Jesus, and as we come to the third temptation, certainly the third one recorded by Matthew, we read, let's read from verse 8 to get the context again, the devil took him, took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me. The very same two verbs employed there by the devil. Now, the interesting thing is the response that he is given, the response made by Jesus.

Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only. What Jesus is saying is, you're asking me to do something that I cannot do, for only God is worthy of worship. It is only before God that one is to bow down and worship. Hence, it is inconceivable that I would do what you are asking me to do. Then on another occasion, moving a little further afield into the book of Acts in chapter 10, involving Peter and Cornelius. In Acts chapter 10 and verse 25, we read, as Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. Now, curiously, though the manner in which the phrase is translated is different, no doubt appropriate given the context, the actual two verbs that are employed here are the same as the ones that we find on the two occasions in Matthew. He fell at his feet in reverence. Of course, the interesting thing is

Peter's response to Cornelius' action. But Peter made him get up. Stand up, he said. I am only a man myself.

[7 : 44] It's very clear what Peter has in view. He says, you ought not to do this to me. I'm only a man. What you are doing is not something that ought to be done before one who is only a man. For your actions are the actions of one who is worshipping, and you are not to worship me. I'm only a man.

Now, it's true that as we think about the wise men, as we try to imagine what is in their mind as they are doing what they are doing, and of course, it's very difficult for us to know. We might say impossible for us to fully know what is in their mind as they do what they do. And in a sense, we're left in a measure to speculate, and we can speculate as to the measure in which the men understood who it was before them. But what ought not to be in doubt is that with the level of understanding and discernment that they enjoyed, and whatever that was, wherever we place that level of understanding, what is without doubt is that they worshiped the king. They did that which only a true believer moved by the spirit of God is able to do. They bowed down and worshipped King Jesus. What brought them to their knees? Why are they worshipping Jesus? What can we learn about worship from the scene before us?

These are the questions that I want to try and answer this morning, and I'll try and do so by identifying five features of their worship that will help you understand what worship is.

And I trust, bring you, bring us all to that place of worshipping Jesus. Let me just indicate the five features or aspects of worship that I'll draw your attention to in this passage and regarding these events. And having identified them, we can just think of them briefly. First of all, we'll notice that this worship is ordered worship in the sense of God-ordered worship. It's informed worship. It's willing worship on the part of these men. It's fitting worship, appropriate, fitting worship. And then finally, we'll notice how it is also, or it could also be described as obedient worship. First of all, then, let's think of this act of worship on the part of the wise men before the newborn babe. Let's think of it or describe it as ordered worship. God ordered the circumstances of the circumstances of the lives of these men that they might be brought to their knees before Jesus. The story, familiar though it is, remains a remarkable story by any measure. These men from the East, possibly Babylonians, possibly Persians, practicing a mixture of astronomy and astrology, that in itself is a curious thing that God would have employed such men, they see a star that leads them to believe that a king has been born in Judea. And they embark on a search that will end when they discover the child-born king, to use their own language. The ordering hand of God is all over this encounter. God, the one

who placed the stars in orbit, who orders the movement of the very stars, does so to awaken in these men a thirst for one worthy of their worship. Now, there are many ideas, many suggestions, many theories as to the origin of the star in question. I don't think it's possible to come to a definitive conclusion. I don't think it's necessary to come to a definitive conclusion.

Some have suggested this could have been Halley's Comet, others a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, and don't ask me more about that after the service, for I have nothing more to add other than just commenting on what some have suggested. A supernova, God may have used a naturally occurring phenomenon to use that language for this purpose. He may have chosen to do so. He may have miraculously ordered the movement of a star, or indeed, he may have created a star. All of these are certainly within his capacity and prerogative. Ultimately, it's not hugely important for us to come to a conclusion.

[12:30] We also, as we see how God orders the circumstances that result in these men worshiping Jesus, we see how he used even the very enemies of the newborn king to point the wise men in the right direction, as we have read in the passage. And as we think of all of these circumstances, and no doubt we could identify others, it is as if God himself has taken them by the hand, and practically ushered them in to the presence of his son Jesus. I think we could rightly say that the wise men didn't find Jesus. God fixed his eyes on them and brought them to Jesus.

And though the story is a story of so long ago, and in many ways so from a time and circumstances that are so different to ours, in a fundamental way, nothing has changed. God is the one who continues to order the circumstances of our lives. He orders the circumstances of your life.

He provokes in you a sense of need, a sense of hunger for something more. He awakens in those he chooses to awaken a consciousness of sin and guilt. He places in your path those who would point you to Jesus. He's brought you here this morning with a purpose in mind. Notice also as we think of these men that he orders the circumstances of the most unlikely candidates. Who would have thought that these pagan magicians, if we can describe them in that way, would bow before the one born king of the Jews, while the religious elites in Jerusalem are guilty of a criminal neglect. God orders the circumstances and draws to himself and draws to his son the most unlikely. Some might say, me a Christian, me on my knees before Jesus, I don't think so. Well, maybe God does think so.

This then is ordered worship, God-ordered worship, but also we can describe it as informed worship. As we've already indicated or suggested, there is much that is mysterious in this account. There are unanswered questions as to the degree of understanding of the wise men concerning the identity of Jesus.

[15:09] And though that be so, we can certainly describe their worship as informed. They bow down before Jesus on the basis of what they know about Jesus. They know he is a king. They themselves declare that.

Notice the language that they use, not born to be a king, but born king, the one born king. And they know that he is not just any king. A star has announced his birth, so granting to the one born divine approval. What more do they know? We don't know what more they knew. We can speculate again, as many have done. Were these men privy to knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures and prophecies concerning the promised Messiah king whose kingdom would never end? Of course, this was information.

This was material that no doubt had been carried to Babylon by the exiles. Was that information that they were knowledgeable of or could have had access to? We don't know.

It's possible, but we simply don't know. Did God grant them, these wise men, by his Spirit, a measure of discernment and knowledge concerning the child? Well, of that we can certainly answer with security that undoubtedly he did. Hence their presence there bowing before him. What we can certainly say is that they knew enough. We can quibble or we can have different views as to how much they knew, but they knew enough to worship. And that is the heart of the matter. It's the heart of the challenge for you today. Do you know enough to worship Jesus? Do you know the one born, the one born king is the eternal Son of God? Do you know that having been born in Bethlehem, he lived a sinless life and died a sinner's death? Do you know that he was crucified in our place as the punishment for our sins?

Do you know that he rose again triumphant from the grave and is today seated at the right hand of the Father as King of kings and Lord of lords? Do you know all of these things? Do you know enough to worship?

[17 : 50] And yet, if you do know all these things, why is it that you still refuse to worship? Do you still stubbornly cling on to your independence as you wait for a more convenient time to bow before King Jesus? How much more do you need to know before you will bow? Perhaps this morning you can honestly say, well, I know very little about Jesus. You don't need to know everything about him to bow down before him. By all means, find out more with the wise men. Give of your time and of your mental faculties to discover more about this one called Jesus. Ask the important question. Study the Bible. Read the Gospels. And as you are informed, so with the wise men, bow down before him and worship.

God ordered worship. Informed worship. But we can certainly also say of these men, what we find described for us is willing worship. Now, over the centuries and indeed to this day, there are many who bow before kings, bow before emperors, bow before rulers and worship them. And they do so out of fear. They do so out of a sense of obligation. They do so because they know that if they don't, then there's trouble coming for them. Even in the case of the account we have, we have mentioned of one such king, King Herod.

He is an example of a tyrant whose rule was built on fear. But the wise men worship Jesus willingly. They bowed down before him joyfully. When they saw the star, as we have read, they were overjoyed.

They want to worship. They have crossed frontiers with that purpose in mind. And there is no place that they would rather be than on their knees before Jesus. May God grant to us that vision of Jesus, that we would see him in all of his beauty, in all of his loveliness, in all of his glory and majesty.

And that as we do, so we would willingly bow down before him. So our prayer ought ever to be, open our eyes that we would see Jesus for who he is. And when we do, we can do no other than willingly bow down before him. Willing worship. But let me just mention one penultimate thing concerning the nature of this worship, or one way in which we can describe the worship of these wise men. We can describe it as fitting worship. The very word worship in English is derived from the word worth. Worship involves an acknowledgement of the worth or worthiness of the one worshiped.

[20 : 57] And fitting worship has, in fact, we might say two connected elements. First of all, and the fundamental aspect of it, is that it is a recognition of the worthiness of the one worshiped. Or to put it in other words, it is a fitting thing to worship the one worshiped. But when we speak of fitting worship, we can also be referring to the manner in which we worship. That we are to worship in a manner that is fitting or appropriate in the light of the one we are worshiping. So there's the substance of the matter. The one we worship is worthy to be worshiped, hence it is fitting. But then also the very manner in which we do so ought to be in a fitting or appropriate manner. Well, who is worthy to be worshiped? Well, in this the Bible is abundantly clear. God alone. Jesus, in his words to the devil.

Peter, in his words to Cornelius, emphasize this truth. The worship of the wise men is fitting because of the identity of the one being worshiped. If the one being worshiped was any one other than God, then it would not be fitting. But because of who he is, we can describe this worship as fitting worship. The eternal Son of God is the object of the worship of these men. As Christians, that is what we believe. Jesus is God and hence worthy of our worship. Now that belief that we hold is either true or it's false. And you have to decide. If it's true, then there can be no more fitting activity for you than to worship him. If you come to the conclusion that it's not true, then it would be the most foolish thing to bow down before him. But fitting also in the manner in which they worship Jesus. We thought about that at the very beginning, how they bow down and prostrate themselves in all probability as an expression of their lowliness in the presence of the highest one. But of course, that is not all that they do. The account is famous for the gifts that they bring. And if we had to summarize or describe these gifts without getting into all the details as often is done, we can say that they gave the very best that they had. They opened up their treasures, gold fit for a king, frankincense used by priests in the temple, fit for a great high priest, indeed the great high priest. Myrrh, which was used to embalm the dead, fit for one born king, but born to die. They bring the very best to the newborn king. Fitting worship. What about you? What about me? Do you recognize that Jesus is worthy of your worship? If you do, then render him fitting worship. What can you give? Well, Jesus is not looking for gold or frankincense or myrrh.

He calls you to come just as you are, bringing to him your sin and your fears and your doubts, that you would cast yourself upon his saving love. And having done so, having put your trust in him as your savior, offer your life as a living sacrifice, your spiritual and reasonable worship, to use the language that Paul employs as he writes to the believers in Rome. What we have before us here is what we could describe as fitting worship. But then finally, what we have here is obedient worship. The wise men could not remain, bowed before Jesus or prostrate before Jesus. In the grand scheme of things, of course, they had to get up and get on with their lives, return from whence they had come.

They had to return to their country. And I wonder, as they returned, were these men resigned to remember this act of worship in which they had participated, to remember it as a pleasant, as an awesome, but increasingly distant memory. And so as the years would go by, they could look back and say, well, yes, that was wonderful, but no longer, no longer the opportunity to worship the king. [25 : 45] Well, as they left the place where Jesus was, their worship was not to end, but their worship would now find expression in obedience. Now, we don't know all of what transpired in the weeks and months and years that followed, but what we do know is enough to demonstrate that their worship found expression in obedience. As we read at the end of the account, having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they return to their country by another route. They obediently do that which they are told to do by God, in this case, by means of a dream. And when we think of ourselves and the need and the place for obedient worship, we can and we must and we do worship Jesus on our knees, be that physically or figuratively, but we must also worship him on our feet as we go about our business as obedient subjects of a king. They bowed down and worship him. Will you bow down and worship Jesus? He bowed down to help you do so.

The incarnation is God in the person of his son bowing down to our level to save us and to enable us to worship him.

He left the glory of heaven and came into this world to serve you and to save you. Will you not bow down before him? He died on the cross in our place, taking the punishment for our sins. Will you not bow down and worship him?

He rose triumphant from the grave, defeating death and destroying the power of sin. Will you not bow down and worship him? There is a day coming when all will bow down before him. Some will do so in rapturous praise and adoration, others in fear and dread before their judge. Of this we are assured, Paul writes to the believers in Philippi in these terms, Therefore God exalted him, exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

On that day, the wise men will be there, bowing before him. Herod will be there, bowing before King Jesus as he awaits the just sentence for his wickedness and unbelief.

[28 : 48] And you will be there too. You will bow down on that great and dreadful day. Will you not bow down today? Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, and we thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the manner in which you have provided for us this great means whereby we can be brought back to you.

We can be brought close to you. We can be reconciled with you. We thank you for the coming of Jesus. We thank you for his life of perfect obedience.

We thank you for his atoning death on the cross. We thank you for the vindication of his saving work as he was raised again from the grave. We thank you that today he is seated at your right hand, interceding for us and governing the cosmos.

We acknowledge that it is right and fitting and proper that we would bow down before him. Help us so to do. And we pray in his name. Amen.