

Family Service

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[0 : 0 0] what I want, when I occasionally need to have a wee peek at what I want to say to everybody, but I'm thinking perhaps especially of the children. Now, this is an easy question that I think most of you will be able to answer. How many days till Christmas? Yes, Samuel, how many days? Seven days. I think it's even less. Good news, it's six. So it's one last day to wait. Isn't that good? It's the best news so far today. It's only six days till Christmas.

Now, who's excited? The children are honest. Oh, the one or two honest adults. Good. And why are you excited?

What are you looking forward to? Yeah, what are you looking forward to? Yes, what are you looking forward to? Opening your presents. What are you looking forward to? I can do whatever I want and get up for you.

Oh, well. Right. You can do whatever you want on Christmas. Now, that is an interesting policy. I don't know if we would want to have that policy, but you certainly can get up whenever you want and you can open your presents. Yes, I think we're all looking forward to opening our presents. Now, I wonder why we give presents at Christmas. Any ideas? Why do we do that? Yeah, why do you think? Because it's God's birthday. Because it's God's birthday, right? We're celebrating the birth of Jesus. And what happened on the first Christmas that maybe would explain why we have this tradition, let's call it that, of giving presents? Any ideas? What happened when Jesus was born that maybe would explain why we give and receive presents? Any ideas?

Yes. It's a bit trickier, isn't it? Well, that's... Oh, yeah. What do you reckon? The wise men gave gifts to Jesus. That's right. The wise men gave gifts to Jesus. And that's exactly what we want to think about this morning. Think a little bit about that. And we've read the passage, and what we're going to do this morning is just dip in and see some of the things that it says in the Bible about that. So, to make sure that everything we say hopefully will be from what the Bible tells us about that story. Now, one of the first things that we're told there, and I'll just... You have to make sure that I'm always checking with the Bible, so I'm not just making this up.

[2 : 2 9] Here in chapter 2 of Matthew, it says that magi, or wise men, from the east came to Jerusalem. Wise men from the east. Now, we don't really know very much about these wise men. In the Christmas cards and in any picture that you have, we always see three wise men. And it's obvious why we imagine that maybe there were three, because there were three gifts. So, it's a reasonable conclusion. But we don't actually know. But we do know that they were wise men from the east. Now, that covers a lot of territory. From Israel to the east covers a lot of ground.

And there are different ideas of where they may have come from. But some people think they maybe came from a place called Babylon. And that these men would have been men who studied religion and science. And very especially among many things that they would have studied, they studied the stars. And imagined and had the idea that there was great significance in the stars, in the movement of the stars. And if they saw anything new, well, that was very exciting for them and very significant. So, these were the men, the wise men from the east. And something happened. Let's just see what happened, that they say happened for them one day. Well, they themselves say that they had seen a star in the east. So, one morning, these wise men, who were always careful to see what was happening in the stars, one morning, well, it probably wouldn't have been a morning. It must have been one night. One night, they looked up into the sky, and there was something different. Something they'd never seen before. There was a new star, or certainly a star they had never seen before. Or maybe it wasn't in the place that they were expecting it, but there was something different. And they were very, very excited by this. They were sure that this must mean something very important. And they, I imagine, were wondering what it might mean. Now, where they lived, if indeed they lived in Babylon, which some people think they did, in Babylon, there were lots of

Jewish people. Because at one time, the Jews had been taken to Babylon by an emperor called Nebuchadnezzar. Some of them had returned to Israel, but many had remained. And so, there were many Jews in Babylon, Babylon, and they would have known the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning a coming Messiah.

And it's very possible that these wise men would have known something about the Old Testament. They would have heard from these Jews. They might even have been able to read some of these prophecies in the Old Testament. And there's one in particular that maybe they were familiar with. In the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers, it tells us that a star shall come out of Jacob. And it tells us, and it suggests that this star would be announcing the coming of a king. Maybe these wise men knew about that, and so they wondered whether this star maybe was announcing this coming king of the Jews. But I don't think they could have come to that conclusion just on what they'd heard. Maybe others tell them about the Old Testament, or maybe what they'd read. I don't think that would have been enough for them to be so sure.

I think we have to say, and we can say very clearly, that God told them. We don't know how. We don't know how God made it clear to them that this star meant that a king had been born in Israel, the king of the Jews. We don't know exactly how they were so sure of that, but it's very clear that they were.

[6 : 31] God made that clear to them. So they've seen this star. They're very excited about this star. They know it's very, very significant. They actually even know what it means. They know that it means that the king of the Jews has been born. So what do they do? What do they do?

I wonder if they just write it down in a book. You know, they're wise men. They probably like reading and writing and all their discoveries, and they'd write it down. Or maybe they'd tell other people what they discovered. You know, other wise men say, look, this is what we've seen, and this is what it means. Or maybe they could write into the paper and say, this is what we've seen, and it's all very exciting. But you know what they actually do? They do something much more important. They say, we're going to go to see this king who's been born. We're not just pleased to know that it's happened. We want to see for ourselves. We want to meet the king who's been born. Now, they didn't know at that time that he was called Jesus. But they didn't need to know his name.

They wanted to see Jesus. They wanted to actually go and meet him. Not just be excited about him, not to know very important things about him, but to meet him. And that's very important for us as well.

You know, we can know lots of things about Jesus because God tells us. He tells us in the Bible. So we can read the Bible, and we can know lots of things about Jesus, who he is and what he's done.

We can know that he's very, very important. We can know that he's the Son of God, and that's very important. But the wise men teach us an important lesson that we don't want to be content just with knowing lots of things about Jesus. We want to meet him for ourselves. And that was true of them. So they get ready. They get ready to make this long journey to Jerusalem. Now, if they were from Babylon, we don't know that for sure. But if they were, it was a very long journey, about 800 miles.

[8 : 33] Now, that is a very long journey. And in order to do this journey, I'm sure the wise men would have needed servants to accompany them, maybe animals that would help them carry their provisions. So it would have been a big traveling party, probably lots of people that set out from Babylon to Jerusalem.

We don't know how long the journey took them. But if it was from Babylon, and if they made good progress, and if there wasn't a lot of snow blocking the way, if it was a clear route to Jerusalem, it would have maybe taken them about 40 days. So it was a very long journey. And they make this long journey, and they make it to Jerusalem. They thought, well, if the King of the Jews has been born, where should we go? We'll go to Jerusalem. Some people think that the star that they saw guided them to Jerusalem. But in actual fact, the Bible doesn't say that. And they wouldn't really have needed the star to guide them. Because if they knew that the child who had been born was King of the Jews, well, the obvious place to go would be Jerusalem, which was the capital of Israel. So they wouldn't have needed to follow a star to get there. They knew that if they wanted to find out more about who had been born, they would have to go to Jerusalem. And so they head to Jerusalem. They knew the way.

There was a lot of trade and traffic between these places. And so they head to Jerusalem. Now, at the end of their journey, they arrive in Jerusalem, and they want to find out where the child is, where the baby who has been born is. I imagine that as they arrive at Jerusalem, after this long journey, they've seen the star. They know what it means. They've had this long journey. I wonder, how do you think they felt when they were just about to arrive?

Say they were in the last day of the journey, after this long journey. How do you think they felt? Yeah, how do you think they felt? Excited. I think they were very excited. We're nearly there. We're nearly going to find them and discover them. And I wonder when they arrived in Jerusalem, and everything was just normal. In Jerusalem, nobody was excited. In Jerusalem, nobody was talking about a king who had been born. Everything was just going about normally. I wonder if they found that a little bit strange. I don't know. But they weren't put off. I imagine, and we're not told this part of the story, but I imagine they went to the temple. That would have been the place to go to ask questions. And they make inquiries. We certainly are told that they make inquiries. Let's see what the Bible says here. They ask this question. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? That's the question they ask.

Now, I want us just to think for a moment about that question, because it's a very important question, and it's very important to think about the way in which they ask the question. They don't ask, has a king been born? They don't ask, do you think that a king has been born? They ask, where is the king that has been born? And what that question shows us is that they were absolutely certain. They're not coming to find out if it's true. It's not that they had this idea, well, this star, it possibly means that a king has been born, and well, we better go and check. So, we'll ask people there. They should know. They weren't, they aren't put off by the fact that nobody there seems to know anything about it.

[12 : 19] They are sure. And so, that's important when you think of their question. Where is the king who has been born? They're absolutely certain that Jesus has been born, though they don't know his name at this point, and that he is the king of the Jews. And that's a lesson for us as well. It's important for us to be certain about Jesus. It's important for us to be sure about Jesus, because other people think different things. Maybe some of the people they asked in Jerusalem, we don't know. Maybe some of the people said, you don't know what you're talking about. No king's been born here. We've got a king.

You're just talking nonsense. Who are you to tell us about this king of the Jews having been born? You've got it wrong. And maybe if they weren't certain, they would have said, oh, well, maybe we have got it wrong. But they are certain. God has made it very clear to them that the news that they bring is true. They are certain that Jesus has been born, and so they won't be put off by any kind of answers they might have received. Well, as they asked these questions, you can imagine that the people who they were speaking to would sooner or later make sure that King Herod would find out about these visitors. If indeed it was a big group of people who arrived, who I imagine it was, it would have been noticeable. The city would have realized that something was happening, that some very interesting visitors had arrived. Some important people had come from a very long distance. And so King Herod was told that these strange visitors had come, asking some very strange questions. And so he wants to know, what's going on? Now, how do you think King Herod would have felt when he heard that people were coming saying that a king had been born? How do you think? How do you think King Herod, who was the king there, how do you think he would have felt? Yes, how do you think he'd have felt?

Okay, so he would have felt quite angry at the thought that somebody else was going to come and maybe take his throne. I think you're right. Well, what does the Bible say? Let's see what the Bible says about how Herod felt. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed. He was troubled.

He was very, very angry or disturbed or worried that somebody would replace him. Now, one of the reasons he was very disturbed is that the wise men were saying that the king of the Jews had been born.

And that title was a very special title because it didn't mean just any king. There had been many kings in Israel.

[15 : 27] But this title, the king of the Jews, spoke about a very special king who had been promised in the Old Testament, a Messiah. So he was a very, very special and important king. And Herod knew that he wasn't very special or important at all.

In fact, though he was king over the Jews, he was in charge. He wasn't really king of the Jews. And we can say he wasn't king of the Jews. He wasn't even a Jew himself. And he was a very cruel and wicked man.

And the people hated him. So that's why we can say he was king over the Jews. He was in charge, but not really king of the Jews. And so when he hears that the king of the Jews has been born, he immediately realizes that he's got trouble and that he has to do something about it.

And what does he do? Well, he starts to investigate. He wants to find out as well where Jesus is. So he calls the wise men who have arrived. And no doubt he was very polite to them.

And I imagine he gave them a nice big meal and welcomed them to Jerusalem and all the things that kings are meant to do with special and important visitors. And then he says, now tell me a little bit about this king who is going to be born.

[16 : 47] But actually before he speaks to them, or maybe at the same time, I don't know, he makes other inquiries about this king who was going to be born.

And the people he asks were the religious leaders, the scribes, the Pharisees, all those people who knew the Bible very well. They knew the Old Testament. And he asked them, now this king of the Jews that I've heard about, that God has promised, this special king, where is he going to be born?

I've heard about somebody, some people are saying that he's been born. Where is he meant to be born? Now the religious leaders, they knew the answer to that. It was an easy question for them.

I wondered if some of them, when King Herod asked them, where is this Jesus or where is this king going to be born? I wonder if the answer they wanted to give was, well in Bethlehem of course, stupid.

But they wouldn't have said that of course because they knew that Herod wouldn't take kindly to being called silly or stupid. But I wonder whether they might have been tempted to answer in that way. Certainly they knew the answer.

[17 : 54] It wasn't difficult. Here in the Bible we're told the answer that they gave. When Herod called together the chief priests, the teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ, the Messiah, the promised king, was to be born.

And listen to the answer that he was given. In Bethlehem in Judea. They replied, for this is what the prophet has written. This is what it says in the Bible. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. So he asks the question and he's given a very clear answer.

This king who is to be born is to be born in Bethlehem. And then he carries on his investigations, but this time with the wise men. And he asks them what they know and what they're planning to do.

And what he does is he's very clever. Very clever in an evil, wicked, bad kind of way. He says to them, well, you've come to worship this king. And well, we know that he must be in Bethlehem.

[19 : 01] That's what the people who know these things have told us. Now, why don't you go and find him and worship him? And when you do find him and, you know, you know for sure where he is and who he is.

Well, you come and tell me. You come and tell me so that I can go and worship him as well. Well, because this king who's been promised in the Old Testament, he's such a special king that I want to worship him as well.

But of course, Herod didn't really mean to do that. He just wanted to find out where Jesus was so that he could go and kill Jesus. Now, wasn't that a terrible thing to do or want to do to actually kill Jesus?

In fact, he was so clever, he says to the wise men, now, this star, when did it appear? Because he wants to know when Jesus had been born.

Remember that the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was a long journey. When they saw the star, the star told them that the baby had already been born or was being born. So, when they arrive in Jerusalem, Jesus had been born for quite a long time.

[20 : 05] We don't know how long, but maybe a few months. And Herod wants to know when Jesus had been born so that he could then make sure that he would be able to discover what age Jesus would have, how old he was, so that that would help him to find the baby who had been born and kill the baby.

It's a terrible and a wicked thing to do, but that is what he wanted to do. Now, we might say, well, surely nobody today would think like that about Jesus. Nobody would be like Herod.

Well, you know, I think some people are like Herod in that they can also, when they hear about Jesus, and especially when they hear about Jesus as a king, and a king is somebody who's in charge.

A king is somebody who can tell us what we should do. A king is somebody who can demand of us our loyalty and our lives. And they say, oh, well, I don't mind a baby born in Bethlehem, but I certainly don't want a king.

I'm in charge of my life, and I don't want anybody else to be king over my life. And so even today, I think lots of people are worried and disturbed about a king called Jesus, and would rather not think about him at all, and certainly not have him as their king.

[21 : 19] Well, the wise men have answered the questions that Herod had. They've had their audience with Herod, and now they need to make their way.

They're excited, remember. They don't want to delay. They want to find this Jesus. And so they leave the palace, and then something very special happens. What does the Bible say? Well, let's see what the Bible says.

Just after they met with Herod, and he'd said what he had to say, we then read in verse 9, after they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Now, we don't know exactly what happens, but what might have happened is that all the way from Babylon, they hadn't actually been following the star. They'd seen the star, and now when they come out of the palace, behold, it says in the old versions of the Bible, behold the star.

Possibly it reappeared, or they saw it again. There's the star. And so they're even more excited, because this, if they'd had any doubt, which they didn't, but if they had, this was just for sure that it was all true.

[22 : 30] There was the star, and this time it does speak about it leading them just over Bethlehem. So they hurry to Bethlehem, and they have this wonderful opportunity to meet the king who has been born.

And how do they feel? How do you think they felt when they saw the star again, and they were making their way into Bethlehem? How do you think they felt? Yeah. Excited. What else? Any other words about how they might have felt when they were just about to meet Jesus?

As well as excited, anything else? Any other words that you might think? Well, let's see what the Bible says, because the Bible tells us how they felt. Let's see what it says. We read there, When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

That does suggest that they hadn't been seeing it the whole journey. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. There's the star again, the star that tells us that a king has been born.

And so they hurry in to meet Jesus, who is there in Jerusalem. And what happens? Well, let's see what the Bible says. On coming to the house, hmm, that's interesting. Jesus seems to be in a house now.

[23 : 42] He's not in a manger anymore. See, lots of time has passed, and Mary and Joseph, they're not going to keep him in a stable. Well, they've found a better place, a safer place, a healthier place for Jesus.

So they're in a house somewhere in Bethlehem, and they come to the house. They're very happy. They rejoice exceedingly. They're just so happy about being so close to seeing Jesus.

And then what happens? Well, can you tell me? We're going to see what it says in the Bible, but when they find Jesus, they see him for the first time, what do they do? Who knows what they do?

Yes. They gave him gifts. That's right. But they did one thing just before that. Yes. What was that? They worshipped him. That's right. Well, let's see what the Bible says.

You've got it dead right, but we'll just read what it says here. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. They bowed down and worshipped him.

[24 : 42] And the idea is they went right down on the floor with their head, their face, right onto the ground in front of Jesus, worshipping Jesus. They'd been at Herod's palaces, and believe me, you can be absolutely sure they didn't do that for King Herod.

I don't know what they'd have done. I don't know if they did handshakes or what they'd have done, but they certainly didn't do this. But when they see Jesus, this baby Jesus, they go right down onto the ground and they worship him.

And the word there is a very special word. It means what you would only do for God. Only God is one we will worship. Some of you were here last Sunday night and we were thinking about the first commandment.

You shall have no other gods before me. Only God is worthy to be worshipped. Well, these men, they worshiped Jesus. Now, they probably didn't understand everything about Jesus.

I'm sure they didn't. But God helped them to know that what they should do on seeing Jesus was bow down and worship him because he was worthy of worship.

[25 : 44] The Son of God, God himself, had come to the world. And so these wise men, very wisely, do what they had to do. They worship Jesus. And then what do they do?

Well, you've told us what they then do. They open their treasures. They have presents for Jesus. We're coming to the end. They had three presents. They were great presents. They were very suitable presents.

What were the presents? Does any of you know what the presents were? Yeah. Gold. Gold, myrrh, and Frankenstein. Is that right? Oh, frankincense.

Right. Oh, dear. That's complicated, isn't it? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Now, lots of people have ideas of what these presents mean.

You know, when you buy presents for somebody for Christmas, some of you are buying presents or at least with your parents' help are choosing presents for other people. And you want them to be right, don't you? You want them to be suitable.

[26 : 41] You want them to be something that would be right for the person. And these presents, I think, were very suitable presents. What we can certainly say is that they were the very best that these men could give.

We can certainly say that. They gave to Jesus the very best that they had. And that's certainly so. But I think each of these presents were suitable. They were the right presents. Gold, some have suggested, speaks about a king.

Gold fit for a king. And Jesus was the king of the Jews. So, a very suitable present. The frankincense was a very special perfume that was used in worship when incense was offered to God.

And it was very much connected with worship. And so, it was a very suitable present because it spoke of this Jesus who was receiving the present as one worthy of worship. And the myrrh was also a kind of perfume.

But it was a kind of perfume, and it's interesting in the Bible, we find myrrh mentioned two other times in the Bible. And it's not at his birth, but at his death. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he was offered myrrh to help ease the pain that he was suffering.

[27 : 53] And then when he was dead and he was buried in the tomb, he was embalmed. He was wrapped in myrrh. And so, maybe, we don't know for sure, but maybe that present was speaking about this baby who had been born who had come to die, who had come to die for us.

And so, these presents, they were the very best the men could give. And they were very suitable presents. But the final thing I want to say is, the wise men gave presents to Jesus.

Now, was there a present for them? They, you know, at Christmas time, imagine what it would be like if you were very keen on getting a present for all your family members, and you managed to do that with some of your pocket money and your savings, and you bought presents, and you gave presents, and you didn't get any yourself.

What would that be like? That wouldn't be very nice, would it? Now, what about these men? Did they get a present? They brought a present. What present did they get? What do you think? That's a tricky one, isn't it?

Because I don't think we've read anything about a present. Yeah, what do you think? They got Jesus himself. That's right. Jesus was the present for them. The Bible says that God so loved the world, he so loved us, that he gave Jesus.

[29 : 12] Jesus is the present. The Apostle Paul speaks of God's indescribable gift, and that gift, that present, that wonderful Christmas present that God gives us is his own son, Jesus.

That is the present that they received, and that we can receive also when we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. So that's something of the story of Christmas, and especially of the wise men.

And I hope that we will learn from the wise men that when we discover who Jesus is, that we would want to meet him, and that we would want to give him the very best that we have, that we would worship him as the wise men did, and that we would receive him as the present that God gives us, the present that we need, because we are sinners, and we need a Savior.

And Jesus is a Savior, as we've even heard today. He's called Jesus because he came to save his people from their sins. Well, let's just pray.