

EPIPHANY SUNDAY 7th JANUARY 'WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM'

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Last Sunday Faye reminded us that the season of Christmas wasn't yet finished. We know from our Scripture Reading in Matthew 2 that the Magi or wise men entered the house where Jesus was living with Mary and Joseph. There was a time lapse between the shepherds coming, the presentation in the temple where Simeon and Anna rejoiced to meet Jesus as a baby, and the magi coming.

We don't know how old Jesus was at the time, but we do know that Herod, out of his insecurity and determination to have no rivals, eventually had all the boys killed who were up to two years old.

So, who were the magi? The magi or wisemen came from the East.

Some traditions believe they came from Africa, Asia and Persia and some sources give them names – Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar though we are not told in Scripture that there were only three of them. And we are not told that they were kings. Some scholars believe, that like the wisemen we are told about in Daniel, they were Persian astrologers who searched the stars and then assigned religious significance to what they saw. One fact stands out above all others. Other than Mary and Joseph, the shepherds were the first sent by the angels and privileged to meet Jesus. They were Jewish, minding flocks where the lambs were probably raised for the sacrifices in the temple. They also represented a very marginalized group looked down on by their fellow Jews. God loves to upset the norms of society. He did the same when it was women who were the first to know that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They too were marginalised in the society of their day. Later, when Jesus started his public ministry, he told the disciples to go FIRST to the Jews.

Then to the Gentiles. Paul in our reading from Ephesians 3 made God's plan plain to us all.

And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus. Ephesians 3:6 NLT What encouragement for each of us.

So today, in our 8 am service we are celebrating Epiphany Sunday. This is a very significant day in our church calendar because the magi represent the Gentiles being introduced to Jesus. Even the Oxford Dictionary defines epiphany as "the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi in Matthew 2:1-12." In our everyday usage of the word 'epiphany' we describe it as 'a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization'. At this momentous point in history God was thinking of us. He never stops thinking of us. Listen to these words from Psalm 139:17 – 18.

"How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when I wake up, you are still with me!

As a teen, many years ago, a billboard I saw stated "Wise men still seek Him." That resonated with me then and still does today but not quite in the same way. Let's return to Matthew's account and see what we can learn.

The wisemen had seen a star in the east, recognized that this was heralding a momentous birth, and had followed the star.

That took preparation, courage and faith. For Gentiles with their own religious beliefs, I admire them. All good so far but then in verse 2 we see them having a stop over in Jerusalem. Here they asked 'where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.' Did the star stop guiding them or was something else happening? Some scholars consider the magi as possibly also being kings. I am not convinced about that. We do know they were wealthy because of the gifts they brought with them. I wonder if they got to Jerusalem and just presumed that the baby would be born there. Jerusalem was a thriving city, there was a palace and obviously following the star hadn't given them the finer details of Jesus birth. It would have been very natural to have thought a king would be born in a palace. I wonder too whether many times we stop seeking what God is telling us and just presume we know what happens next. Sadly, this led to consequences in our story. Herod⁷ was deeply disturbed. But he did a wise thing! The wise men had said they were searching for the King of the Jews so Herod called for the leading priests and teachers of the religious law and asked their advice. They knew their scriptures. Micah 5:2 clearly states that the future ruler of Israel would come from the small village of Bethlehem which was only a few kilometres from Jerusalem. As we know, he then, very deviously, tried to trick the wisemen by telling them he wanted to worship the baby too. Again, they followed the star which led them right to the house where Jesus was living. This filled them with both wonder and joy. Their response was to worship him. In a very real sense, they became the first Gentile believers in the New Testament. We see further evidence of them being open to God's leading when God warned them in a dream NOT to return to Herod.

I am so grateful that God included Jews and Gentiles as witnesses both to his coming to earth as a babe and to his resurrection. Where so many are still marginalised, still not seen and heard by society and sadly, at times even by us, God stepped in and made sure all would feel welcome in His kingdom.

So yes, the wisemen had wisdom but their wisdom faltered at times. So does ours. Far too often we second guess what God is saying or wanting from us.

That billboard sign really had the answer: Wise men still seek - HIM. The wise men learned that true wisdom was found by listening to and following God.

They had an epiphany -

‘a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization’. It led them to worship. I wonder how that experience changed their lives.

What about us? Are we going to continue to walk in our own wisdom or will we also seek an epiphany – a personal moment of renewed and deeper revelation or realization of God. And will that lead us to worship Him more?

My personal prayer for each one of us is:

“To listen, follow and worship Him more in 2024”