

**Talk 1 – when did it all happen?**

As I said in the church magazines, January sees the start of our journey following the life and ministry of Jesus, from the first Christmas to the first Pentecost.

The only problem with this is the Church of England, perhaps slightly oddly, doesn't actually make this an easy thing to do. As a benefice, we like to follow the lectionary readings as far as we can, and some of those come in a slightly unhelpful order. Yes we've done the birth of Jesus, today we are looking at the visitors from the East, but the next part of Jesus' life – when the baby Jesus is presented at the temple, is a vital part of the feast of Candlemas – which is celebrated at the end of January. Now Candlemas is one of those feasts that most of us don't know a lot about, so I thought it would be a good idea for us to celebrate Candlemas in all it's – well whatever it is. So that part of Jesus' story will be delayed a few weeks.

But when we left the story at Christmas, the baby Jesus had been born, and the shepherds had come to visit. Now, what you may be thinking is that the visitors from the East – the wise men, the kings, whatever you want to call them – are next, but actually there are a couple of things which probably happened first.

Probably? Well, unfortunately dates are a bit thin on the ground in the bible and so we have to try and work them out. What we also have to do is to tie together what Luke tells us and what Matthew tells us.

What do we know?

Luke tells us about the journey to Bethlehem and that census, and we know such censuses were held every 14 years. Actual documents are held for the censuses from AD20 to around AD270 so working backwards there was probably a census in the year 8BC.

But, Luke tells us the census was held when Quirinius was governor of Syria – and he was not governor 6AD – but he did hold a previous post from 10BC until 7BC, so we think Luke simply made a mistake in the exact post that Quirinius held.

So, we can assume Jesus was born in 8BC.

It was Luke that told us about the shepherds – and we know they visited on the night of the birth.

Luke also tells us of the three ancient ceremonies that a new born child had to go through.

First, 8 days after the birth, Jesus was circumcised, and that was when he was officially named Jesus.

Second, in what was called the Redemption of the First-Born, following the tradition whereby a first born child was given to God, the parents had to make a contribution to the temple to, if you like, buy back, their son. It wasn't very much – maybe about a pound, but had a much greater symbolic meaning.

Third there was purification after childbirth. After a certain period of time, the mother was no longer considered unclean, and the parents had to make a sacrifice of a lamb at the temple, or if they were poor, a pigeon was acceptable.

These three ceremonies all took place in the first 6 weeks or so of Jesus' life – all as laid down in ancient Jewish tradition as explained in the scriptures. But enough of these – as we will be looking much at these when we celebrate Candlemas at the end of the month.

But now we come to our visitors from the east, and working out the timing is again really difficult. In the same way that only Luke tells us about the shepherds, only Matthew tells us about the visitors from the East, and what Matthew tells us is that they came to visit while Mary, Joseph and Jesus were in Bethlehem. How long did they stay in Bethlehem – we don't know. But this was Joseph's home town, and they were quite likely to be staying with his family at least until Mary was again able to undertake that journey. So when did they come?

There are two ways of looking at this. First, the star. There is a line of thought that says, yes this was a real star, and that the most likely answer is that it was one of the occurrences that happen from time to time where there a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter – and there was one of the astronomic events in the year 7BC – which would fit with Jesus being born the previous year and Mary and Joseph staying in Bethlehem for a while.

Second, Herod. The Herod we are talking about here was often known as Herod the Great, and in many ways he deserved that title. He was the only ruler of Palestine who succeeded in keeping the peace and bring order into disorder. He was a great builder; he was indeed the builder of the temple in Jerusalem.

He could be generous – in times of difficulty he let people off paying taxes – and in the famine of 25BC he had actually melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for starving people.

But there was a problem with Herod the Great. He was insanely suspicious. He simply didn't trust anyone. He murdered various members of his family – including his wife and two of his sons, so when these wise men came to visit and said they were looking for a child who would be king, he would have immediately plotted to get rid of the baby. So this is definitely the Herod we are talking about. He was appointed governor in 47BC; in 40BC he received the title of King and he was to reign until the year 4BC. So for the wise men's visit to take place in the year 7BC fits.

And what about those wise men – well we'll consider what they added to the story later, but for the sake of our story, they visited, they left gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and then they left by another route.

So back to our story. The next significant event is that an Angel of the Lord told Joseph to flee to Egypt, and stay there until the Angel tells them otherwise. Why?

Well, here Herod takes centre stage. Having been, as he would have seen it, tricked by the wise men, he worked out that this child who would be King must be under 2 years old, and so demanded that every child under 2 in Bethlehem should be killed.

Not in any way wishing to diminish the evil which Herod did, we must also remember that Bethlehem was a small town, and would probably have had something like 20 to 30 children under 2, and so killing that number of children, in a land where murder was widespread, is not something that would be particularly cause much of a stir. So the fact that the only place that this is mentioned is in Matthew's gospel – there is no mention in other writings of the time, should not be a huge surprise.

And finally for today, Herod the Great dies. It seems that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were in Egypt for about 3 years when the Angel told them to go home. They set off back to Bethlehem, but on hearing that Herod's successor was Archelaus, who was Herod's Son, and really not much better, Joseph took Mary and Joseph back to Nazareth. Apart from one trip to Jerusalem where Mary and Joseph managed to lose Jesus, which we'll save that for another day, that's all we hear about Jesus for round about 26 years.

## Talk 2 – Can you love a King?

Sometimes, when I am driving home at night, quite possibly from one of our 4 villages, I am looking over towards Cambridge, and there is a really amazing amount of light coming from the city. That light is clearly a sign of modern times – it is the sort of light that we can both love and hate – it is the sort of light that is created by street lights – and how often do we complain that there are not enough street lights when we are trying to find a house in the dark, or when we are driving up the M11 at night, perhaps a bit tired. But then, where is the night? There is something very special about being in parts of the world – even parts of this country – when you can go outside at night and see, well, nothing really, except, if the clouds don't get in the way, stars. And sometimes we see a particularly bright light in the sky and we wonder what star or planet that is, only to very quickly realise it's an aircraft of some form preparing to land.

No such problem two thousand years ago, and the ancient world never forgot the night sky. Many people, particularly in the countries to the east of Palestine, had developed the study of stars and the planets to a fine art, giving each one very particular meanings. They very much believed the whole world was interconnected, and when something important happened on earth you would expect to see it reflected in the heavens. And so, not surprisingly, if they saw something remarkable happen among the stars and the planets then that meant something remarkable was to happen on earth.

So that star, was not a one off, but part of a pattern of behaviour that some people would be used to following. But let us remember who is telling us about this star.

Matthew, who very clearly wrote his gospel for a Jewish audience. An audience who had been expecting the coming of the Messiah for many hundreds, if not more, years. Matthew who has no real sentimentality about his Christmas story. Matthew doesn't mention a stable. Matthew doesn't mention the shepherds coming to see the Christ child. Matthew doesn't even give us any details of the birth of Jesus – all Matthew tells us is that Joseph had no marital relations with Mary until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Matthew starts his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah starting with Abraham. We then have that short passage about the birth of Jesus – or more precisely the Angel talking to Joseph about the coming child. And then we have the Visit of the Wise Men. Matthew clearly saw this as vital – so let's try and understand why.

And the answer is in what Matthew is saying about these visitors – and it is political dynamite. These visitors – sorry we don't know how many there were – the notion of three only really comes from the three gifts they brought and how many time have you visited people with something else other than one gifts from each of you?) these Magi, which is the actual word Matthew uses for them which can refer to magicians, astrologers, or even experts in interpreting dreams, but not anything royal like a king, they have come to find the 'child who was born to be King of the Jews'. But hang on a minute, Herod was King of the Jewish people – he was half Jewish himself. Perhaps it is not surprising he got, shall we say, a little annoyed.

But there is another side to this as well, and Matthew is keen that we shall realise this, as he includes in what the magi say to Herod, one of the prophecies from the Old Testament about the coming Messiah. And those prophecies give a very clear message that the Messiah's reign will not be restricted to the Jewish people but to all people. Whilst it is true that Jesus did not deliberately seek out Gentiles during his ministry, he was perfectly happy to spend time with Gentiles, much to the annoyance of the Jewish Authorities. And at the end of Matthew's gospel he tells of Jesus' great commission – Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

And it is the arrival of this baby who will become the new King that the magi have seen, and have come to find him. Even when Jesus was this unknown baby there is a sign of what is to come. Those gifts that the magi brought were the sort of things that people at that time would think of as appropriate presents to bring to kings, or even gods.

But this all leaves me with a question. Do we really see Jesus as a King, as ruler, and if so, how does that fit in with this idea of establishing a personal relationship with Jesus. Can we really have that sort of relationship with someone who rules our lives?

The closest I can come up with an answer for this is to talk about another "name" we give to God which is "Father God". Now for some people any comparison between God and their own Fathers can be an issue, especially where their relationships with the Fathers is, or was, difficult.

But to look at a relationship with God as a child parent relationship, thinking about what the ideal child parent relationship would be like, can, I hope, be helpful.

A child parent relationship contains that mix of love and obedience that any relationship with God must have. To this day I remember so well an incident when I was a child where I had been riding my bike on some pretty rough ground not far from our home, where my parents had told me I shouldn't be at all, and trying to ride up an impossibly steep slope I had fall off my bike backwards and was left with a somewhat bloody head. My friends who were with me helped me home and I remember my mother very carefully, and very lovingly, cleaning me up, and assuring me that phrase, "You've cracked your head open" did not apply to me. And when she assured my friends that I was OK, but No, I couldn't go back to play, and they had left, she then told me off, quite strongly, for having been where I shouldn't have been, and that I only had myself to blame for a sore head. But behind that lecture was an overwhelming care for how I was, and the love of a mother for her son.

So there are a number of messages that we can learn from the (possibly three ) wise men, the magi, but not the kings. And we need to combine those messages with the other teachings of Jesus so that we can try and create that right relationship between us and Him.

Jesus was born as King over us. He rules us – or to put it another way, He makes the rules.

The message of the magi was not that they had come to find someone special, a baby who is a bit cute, or even the baby who was the son of God – that is not who they were looking for. They were looking for the baby who would be the King of the Jews – and we learned from the prophets that magi quoted, that he would be the King of the Gentiles, the non-Jewish part of the world, as well.

Jesus is worth looking for. We don't know how long these magi travelled for, but our understanding is that it was not a simple, short, trip. We don't know how much pre work these magi had done in order to be able to understand what that star was telling them. But they clearly considered it was worth the effort. Finding Jesus, worth the effort?

When we find Jesus our learning isn't complete – it's really only just the beginning. I would love to be able to say to each and everyone of you today that simply by accepting Jesus as your King, you would immediately know how to make that relationship with Jesus work, but I'm afraid it's not that simple. But how do you do it? Well, this is going to sound terribly corny but it is true – we have an excellent book of instructions, and by reading from this book regularly, we learn what we need to make that relationship work.

And, finally, and this is the best bet, when we do things wrong, that is not the end of our relationship with Jesus – in many ways it is just a new beginning.

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of our story, of our journey. Right towards the end of that story Jesus dies on the cross – so that we can be forgiven for what we have done wrong, and for what we will do wrong. But you know, we don't have to wait until we reach that part of the story at Easter. We can start exploring the story ourselves, through the instruction book. We can start building that relationship by regularly talking to Jesus through prayer – including, when we mess up, saying sorry to him, and knowing, that he is listening, and forgiving us.

Welcome to the journey. Welcome to the story.

Amen