

Those Magi Guys And Our Worship.

Epiphany 2022

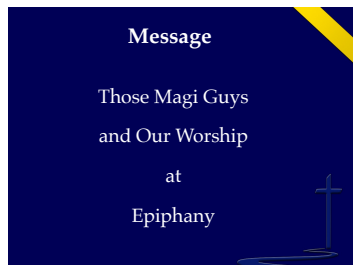
Matthew 2:1-12

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.



Introduction:

Epiphany is a Greek word meaning manifestation or showing forth. It refers to the way Israel's longstanding hope of God's glory being revealed through her to all the nations of the world was realized in Jesus Christ. As we heard in Isaiah this morning:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. [Isaiah 60:3]

While there are many flaws and failures to lament in church history it remains a present fact of history that the faith of Israel, a people of the Ancient Near East has through Jesus Christ and his church been accepted by people of every nation and people group on earth. That is Epiphany promised and delivered – withstanding a few as yet unreached tribes.

The Gospel of Matthew points to this beginning with the visit of Pagan astrologers described as 'Magi' –think magician- or wise men from the East, perhaps Persia. ¹

These Gentiles -Pagans from the nations- read and interpreted the stars to find humanity's new king from heaven and came to worship. It's a curious part of the Christmas story.

Unless you are Jewish, these pagan seekers represent us.

Do you have any idea of what your ancestors were worshipping 2000 years ago? From what archeology suggests I suspect it was not a sweet business, especially in Northern Europe!

This story of the first realization of Epiphany is surprising. These pagan astrologers may have had a poor worldview and bad theology but, they did understand worship in ways we might well learn from. This is what I want to look at and develop today.

¹ We are not told how many there were but because of there being three gifts they are traditionally assumed to number three.

Worship:

For about 1800 years -in my telling- the Hebrews and then the People of Israel had been learning two fundamental lessons:

- A. Who the one true God is ²
- B. How do we worship this one true God

Israel's Big Lessons:

1. Who is the true God - YHWH the LORD?
2. How do we worship him rightly?

Learning this was a very bumpy process vulnerable to confusions and distortions. The key difficulty was that God, or YHWH, is not like other gods. He is Holy meaning 'other' or not like what the neighbours worship.³ Therefore the worship of the holy LORD was also something new. It too needed to be holy appropriate to the One being worshipped.

These two questions lead to 2 points of consideration essential for understanding worship.

- 1) Worship is determined by the 'object' of worship. It is shaped by that first who question. The Anglo-Saxon word 'worship' is very helpful here. It simply means giving what the other is worth.⁴

Thus the logic builds, A holy God deserves and requires holy worship.

The assumed key here is that worship / giving due worth is determined by the object of worship or in our case, the value of God and Jesus Christ.

All good, but this implies that worship is not essentially determined by the subject or the worshipper themselves. It's not about us. It is what arises or flows from us the worshipper in response to the recognized worth of the one worshipped.

- 2) Secondly, the Holy God of Israel known as YHWH made it clear time and again that worship needed to be personally authentic or genuine. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis speaks to this. Cain made his offering from the harvest of his field but he was not personally invested. He was only going through the motions and so his attempt at worship was rejected.

A shorthand for this is: "We are the worship." Worship is not primarily about getting it right to some formula or something achieved through correct words or ritual.⁵

2 Key Points on Worship:

1. It's all about the worth of the One.
2. It's personal.

² Today in the East that question still lives while in the West the question has become whether God actually exists.

³ As Karl Barth would say in the 20th century: "God is not man writ large."

⁴ I am not aware of other European languages stressing this insight.

⁵ As the medieval church claimed with '*ex opere operato*' where a properly ordained priest saying the official liturgy could not get it wrong – so long as the formula was complied with, God would smile and grace would flow.

Jesus echoed this need for genuine worship while speaking to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well when he said: [John 4.23-24]

²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Until Jesus said this the conversation had been about where people should worship and which mountain was right for this purpose. Jesus pointed to spirit and truth and dismissed the various temples of stone to anticipate the temple of the spirit God wanted us to be.

The Magi saw in Jesus a king sent from heaven so they came to acknowledge and give him his worth.

- They travelled - which took time and energy.
- They gave him attention.
- They bent the knee.
- They revered him representing their homage and worship with costly gifts.

Their theology may not have been biblical but their practice of worship was great!

Application

So what might this mean to us here as church today?

This event here today is set up as an opportunity to worship God together as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Israel's Big Lessons:

1. Who is the true God - YHWH the LORD?
2. How do we worship him rightly?

The same issues Israel faced apply for us and never change:

- a) Who is God? What is his character and heart?
- b) How should we respond to his worth now in worship?
/ How to do that?

Q: So getting practical what do we actually do here?

A: Let's make a list:

- We turn up on Sunday - more or less on time!
- We offer set prayers of confession, praise and adoration.
- We sing prayers of praise, thanksgiving and worship.
- We make offering in money – cash or digital.
- We sign and seal our faith and hope in Christ through Holy Communion
- Etc.

My point is that these activities are not in themselves worship in spirit and truth. These activities are forms of worship we use to be able to worship together.



I would compare them to the well-known love languages – different ways in which people show and receive love can include Time, Touch, Talk, Service or Gifts. ⁶

All these things are appreciated but they are not love itself. They manifest the love and enable it to be given and received.

‘Religion’ can be the business of getting this mixed up.

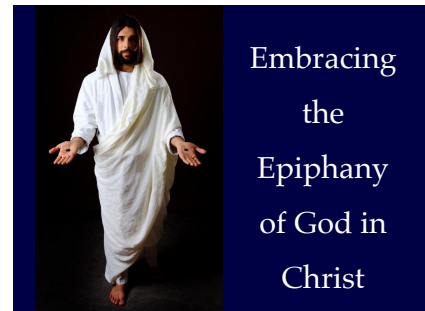
Q. So what is the way forward?

The answer is the Jesus Epiphany in two dimensions!

He is the answer to every question

A1: Jesus shows us what God is like.

Jesus is the very imprint of the invisible God.



A2: And he shows us how human beings are to relate to God and each other in God’s Kingdom.

So what we need to do is bring every issue, every question, every aspect of life to Jesus. This is called discipleship and constitutes the core of our worship.

We present ourselves as living sacrifices to the one who brings God to us and laid himself down for us.

How do you get into this?

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the go-to books!

Get into them every day to meet and savour Jesus.

Bring Jesus into every meeting and discussion.

⁶ To Learn about love languages go to: <https://www.5lovelanguages.com/2018/06/the-five-love-languages-defined/>