

Three Kings **Sermon on Matthew 2: 1-12**

object of the wise men's search
subject of an old man's song
fulfilment of the Baptist's preaching

Remember those sentences from our call to worship?

They invite us to meet the three wise men, Simeon, the old man in the temple, and John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus.

And what those men search for, sing and preach about is all about light and love, about a change in the world, and a new beginning, about coming and meeting and seeing, about walking with God...

...towards him, until we find him, then with him, because we have found him.

This is where we are a fortnight after Christmas.

And today we are meeting an important part of the evangelist Matthew's Christmas stories... or, would it be better to say: after Christmas stories?

Matthew's tale is all about light shining in fearful darkness.

Jesus is born into a dangerous world where a young girl who becomes pregnant before her time, must hide behind her mother's skirts, when the news is told to her father. And where she, her child, and her whole family risk being overwhelmed by disgrace...

Jesus in the gospel of Matthew is born too close to the centre of power in Jerusalem and especially to Herod. And the news of his birth is spread by magi, or wise men, or kings – all is possible –, and they seem more skilled at reading stars than at handling politics.

After they'd found the baby Jesus, they return home and the terrible killing of the male newborns starts, from which Jesus escapes only, because his parents flee to a neighbouring country.

Matthew's fragile Jesus born at home in Bethlehem – no census and no journey from Nazareth are mentioned – becomes a candle of light in a dark world, where the concern of the mighty lies on power and honour, for which they'd stop at nothing – “über Leichen gehen”, we say in German – which means you walk over dead bodies, and this is exactly what Herod and his colleagues do at all times.

The main focus at Christmas rarely falls on Matthew's stories, except on his story of the wise men. These are turned into kings and enter easily and happily the Christmas story, as we know it from Luke. The three kings are a nice and shining addition to Luke's lighter and more joyful tales.

In Luke there is no threat to Mary's relationship with Joseph. And Herod isn't mentioned either.

In Matthew we have the soldiers, the killing of the infants, the flight to Egypt and the living as refugees.

But before all those, it is the magi – or the kings – who come, follow a star and search for a newborn king.

And with all that they walk on OT ground. In the books of Samuel, in Micah, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah and in the psalms traces of this promised king can be found.

But who are those people that tradition has turned into kings and given kingdoms, nationalities, different colours of skin and names?
There is no doubt they are rich. They bring expensive gifts.
But first of all their precious star brings them to the wrong place. Looking for a king and loaded with presents they think fit, they assume he must be found in what clearly is the centre of power in that part of the world.
Not only are they in the wrong place, but they are looking for quite the wrong kind of king.

Their news shared at Herod's place finds open ears. Herod's own experts are only needed to fill in the detail of the birthplace.

What happens in the gospel of Matthew is that the first people – apart from Mary and Joseph – to come and worship the newborn king, are outsiders in more ways than one.

They were not Jews. They come from the east from where not much good is expected. But: they have caught the movement of the star. And they have realized, what it means. They are clever and curious, and they are wise. They have made the most amazing journey to find not just a king, but a God.

Just – what are we to make of these kings, and especially of their star?
That star is a storyteller's star. It does not have to exist. No proof of it needs to be made. The star Matthew tells us of wants to delight people, to comfort and guide, to wake up and set off... And it wants to remind the world that Jesus' birth is an event of cosmic significance – it affects all people at all times in all ages...

The story of the wise men, who I don't call kings anymore, contains two real kings, who cannot be more different from one another than they are.
On the one hand, we have Herod in his grand palace, in his capital city, used to ordering people... Herod has troops at hand who will obey any order he gives. He has huge power, but is terrified he might lose it... A problem of all Herods at all times. And if you think of some trouble spots of today's world, you may feel, you can add to a number of leaders' names the by-name Herod...

On the other side, we have the newborn king Jesus and the assumption that this must be God. We have a God who is "with us", lying seemingly helpless in an insignificant house in an insignificant village.

The wise men fall to their knees and worship.

They can't help it. There is nothing else they could do.

They hadn't done this at Herod's palace, but here with the small child and the young mother they find themselves at once on holy ground. They are kind of overwhelmed and caught by the holy.

They offer what they have brought – expensive gifts such as the Herods of their world would expect or demand.

In the small family house in Bethlehem they must have been strangely out of place ... but do you remember the Isaiah reading with its vision? Matthew had to put it that way, great storyteller as he is.

The wise men offering their gifts is the highpoint of Matthew's whole story of the birth of Jesus. It is truly wonder-full! Filled with wonder. And the painters, the poets and the writers of carols do well to make us pause and reflect.

These wise men were on holy ground there in Bethlehem: a simple house, a young child, parents grateful for the birth of new life... And they ask us, where our holy grounds are that we could be led to by simply following the light of a star...

And when we arrive... and feel at peace with what we have found, what is it that we would bring? What would our gifts be? Our offers?

Today we have time to reflect this. But in Matthew's story there is none.

Matthew hurries on and takes us out into the pitch dark.

The wise men are not allowed to stay longer. No lingering in the peace of it all. As soon as their gifts are handed over, they are warned by God not to return to Herod.

In that small house in Bethlehem, and in the child lying in Mary's arms, they have found the kingdom of heaven. And they realize, how very different this is from the kingdom of Herod or any other worldly sovereign.

The wise men are wiser now.

With God opening their sleeping eyes, they can see through Herod's awful plan. They will not be his instruments. They can guess too easily what he has in mind. They will not become his informers! And so they leave by another road and have nothing more to do with the centre of power of a terrified and ruthless king.

They try to do what is best.

They get away without trouble.

But what they cannot prevent is the massacre that follows.

Joseph and Mary with the baby manage to run away – just in time. From now on they are refugees, and the little newborn child – king – God is in yet another great danger... But this is for another sermon.

Would the wise men have made a difference, had they stayed? And where would they have stayed? In the house of the family of God? Or with Herod – talking to him from man to man? Trying to make peace politics? Persuade a dictator to agree to justice and human rights? Let him sign a contract and trust that he will stick to it? Send peace corps or neutral observers for the safety of the population?

What would we have done?

In Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus, the wise men are the only ones who worship him as he deserves. And when they leave Bethlehem, they go alone. The road echoes to nothing but the sound of their feet, and once they will have gone, will fall silent again.

No spreading of the good news. No angels in the skies to invite more visitors to come and adore...

And maybe, maybe the wisest thing the wise men ever did in the stories of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew is to ask the best possible question: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"

I wish us on this first Sunday in the New Year the wisdom to ask the right questions throughout the next year – questions that will lead us to Jesus and keep us together on this road.

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And it is all about light and love, about a change of the world, and a new beginning.

Amen.