

Prayer

Only You have known me since the beginning of time; Lord Jesus.
 Only You have cared about everything that has happened to me, Lord Jesus;
 Only You have an answer to the deepest of my needs, Lord Jesus;
 Only You have provided me with a way to find perfect peace, Lord Jesus;
 Only You have walked this path with me, and know my heart, Lord Jesus;
 Only You have given me love eternal. All praise to You, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Pastors

Each church has a system of pastoral care, though much is given unofficially. Pray that everyone who is part of your church community might feel loved, from leaders to infants.

On-going prayers

- Pray for the African Union meeting in Cairo, and Zimbabwe
- Give thanks for food and drink
- Pray for those who are the victims of political violence today

Meditation

Guidance on the journey comes in many forms:

Well-meaning, worldly counsel; but ignorant
 Compared to the wisdom of the Spirit.

Signs and wonders in the heavens; mysterious,
 But not as deep as the Saviour's love.

The rising up of inner feelings; powerful,
 Yet not as straight as the truths of scripture.

Personal fear of doing things wrong? The Devil's grip
 Which Christ alone can loosen and break.

Or the strong, prophetic voice of God; reassuring,
 Leading us to walk the narrow way.

Make a choice to let the Saviour walk with you ...

Bible Study - Matthew 2:1-12

¹ When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star rise in the east and have come in honour of him.'

³ When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, as were all in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, and then asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what was written by the prophet:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not the least among the rulers of Judah; for from you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly, and found out from them exactly when the star appeared. ⁸ He sent them on to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and honour him.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they saw in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

¹¹ They came into the house and saw the child with his mother Mary, so they bowed down and honoured him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned to their country by another route.

Review

After writing a genealogy of Jesus and describing the wonderful miraculous story of Jesus' conception, Matthew continues to tell us more about Jesus' coming into the world in today's scripture. When Jesus was born, there was feverish expectation about the coming of the Messiah amongst many Jewish groups (such as the Essenes, which we know about these from the Dead Sea Scrolls). However, Jesus was not born into any one of these, but into an ordinary Jewish home, untroubled by the politics of his day because His role was far greater. Luke's story (Luke 2:1f.) is about how Jesus was received by poor people just like Jesus' own family; but Matthew's story tells us that Jesus' birth did in fact have a big impact on the kings and rulers of His day.

The chief characters in our story are the Jewish King Herod and the Gentile 'kings' or 'Magi'. Little is known about the Magi, and many people think there were three, but Matthew does not say this; people have only deduced this from the fact that three gifts were given (2:11), and we must keep true to the text when studying what has become a famous story! In order to find Jesus, the Magi used 'astrological' skills to follow a star, and some find it hard to understand why God accepted homage to Jesus from such pagans. However, it is interesting that when the Magi found Jesus, they worshipped Him as King and God, as indicated by the gifts they brought, indicating royalty, holiness and honour. Afterwards, they returned home; but importantly, they represented Gentiles at the birth of Jesus, and God's plan for Salvation had always included all nations.

Herod the Great was a different character altogether. He was the ruler of 'greater Palestine' from 37 – 4 BC acting with the authority of the Roman Empire. He was ruthless, cruel and, like many a dictator, wanted to leave a heritage by which he would be remembered. He was not loved by the Jewish people because he was half Jew and half Gentile, but in order to gain the people's affections, he had a magnificent new Temple built in Jerusalem during his reign. There is little doubt that Herod would have regarded any 'Messiah' as a threat to his authority, and he knew that groups like the Essenes were preparing for the 'last days' and the overthrow of Roman authority (and him!). It does not take much to see that Herod's only interest was his own status and power, which meant he needed to control everything. This largely explains his actions throughout this story.

Knowing this, we will be able to explain a mystery which has long concerned those who read this story. In verse 6, Herod asks for scripture references to explain where the Messiah would be born. The answer given by the scribes bears some connection with Micah 5:2. However, in reality, this verse is a concoction of Micah 5:2, 2 Samuel 5:2 and Isaiah 11:1! What were the scribes doing? They were probably making a point to Herod by answering his question but also telling him that the Messiah would be a humble godly

servant like David! Now Herod wanted to be remembered as a 'Messiah' to the Jewish people, but the scribes told him bluntly he was not!

Lastly, the appearance of a star is another famous feature of this story. We know from ancient documents that ancient Persians correctly predicted that around 6/7 BC there would be an astrological conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the solar region of Pisces. In addition, Jupiter represented the 'Star of the Universe', Saturn the 'Star of Palestine', and Pisces the 'last days'. No wonder astrologists came to Palestine to see what was going on! However, such matters only hide Matthew's intentions, and do him an injustice. From his point of view, the star was a miracle, and Matthew was convinced that the supernatural events he wrote about taking place because of the birth of the Messiah. This is not a 'fairy story' or a means of dating the birth of Jesus, it is the miraculous story of what happened.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. There are many aspects to the story of the Magi, what have you noticed about it that is not covered in the notes?
2. What do you think the Magi thought of Herod as they journeyed away from Judah?
3. Can you think of examples today of when people have gone to extraordinary lengths to witness great events?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This famous story has been used so much to tell the story of Jesus, we are strongly conditioned by the assumptions that we place around it, largely that this incident happened some time after Jesus' birth. We need to get right out of the mindset of the nativity play if we are to rediscover what Matthew wanted to say about who Jesus was. This can be quite challenging!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Look up the passages of scripture which are mentioned here as behind verse 6. Read them carefully and find the words which go together to make up the quote. What do these passages say to you?
- Find an opportunity if you can to share what you think about this story with someone who is not a regular church goer. Dare to explain the difference between myth and scripture!

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we seek and always find You within this world of ours. All too often we forget You and miss what You are doing. So, give us the grace to accept our failures and turn to You for constant love, support and guidance. You never fail us! Thanks be to God! AMEN