

The Life of Jesus

Sermon 1- "Strange Visitors"

Passages: Revelation 7:
Matthew 2:1-12

What are you **hoping** for in 2014? Have you made any New Year's resolutions? If you have, then you will quickly see what you are hoping for. Perhaps you hope to break a bad habit, like smoking or drinking too much coffee. Perhaps you hope to study more, work harder at your marriage, pick up a new hobby. Perhaps you hope for better relationships with friends and family. You **hope....**

My hope for 2014 is to be more like the Magi that we read about in today's passage from Matthew 2!

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

Scholars have long laboured to discover what this guiding 'star' might have been. At one point, scholars thought it Halley's Comet. But more recent research suggests that this so-called "star" was probably the alignment of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn (which were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC). Jupiter, you see, was known as the 'royal' or kingly planet, while Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews. And so, the alignment of these two planets would have been a sign to these Eastern astrologers that a new *king of the Jews* was about to be born. In their way of thinking, strange events in the heavens are divine signs which point to important earthly events.

In 2014, I want to be more like the Magi! In what way?

To start with, **these men were spiritually aware.**

By that, I mean that they were attentive to a world beyond the physical; an invisible world to which the physical constantly pointed. The astronomical activity they witnessed in the heavens was, therefore, "read" in much the same way that we would read a road map. Heavenly signs point to earthly

realities. Earthly realities reflect heavenly truths. And so, these wise men came to Bethlehem seeking the heavenly truth which lay behind the physical events. They were spiritually aware; sensitive to the world around them and willing to be led by the signs.

Secondly, **the Magi were prepared to act on what they saw**. Sure, it's quite obvious that they had both the time and the money to check out their hunches. If you think about the expensive gifts that they carried (gold, frankincense and myrrh), it's clear that these men were independently wealthy. (This is why they have often been falsely referred to as "the three kings".)

But, of course, Matthew is not telling us that the Magi made the long voyage simply to satisfy their *astronomical curiosity*. What Matthew is implying is that these foreigners came because **they couldn't help themselves!** They were drawn to Bethlehem by a force far greater than themselves—a force that rules all nations and commands the hearts of all kings-- a God who writes the major events of history in the sky using the planets as his pen. That is why they brought such expensive gifts! That is why they came with their finest and most costly worship: they couldn't help but lay *everything* down before this king.

If only I would be as bold as they-- prepared to go anywhere and put everything I have on the line to follow my King in costly devotion, willingly obedient to His spiritual guidance and acutely aware of His insights!

Thirdly, I want be more like the Magi because **they held a strong balance between what they experienced and what they read in the Scriptures**. Although they were open to this new experience of following a star, their itinerary was ultimately governed by the Jewish Scriptures...Scriptures they probably acquired hundreds of years earlier when Jewish exiles were brought to their land during the reign of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. (Isn't it amazing how God "makes all things work together for good"?)

You know, it would be easy to confuse the spirituality of the Magi with the sorts of spirituality we see in places like Byron Bay. In Byron, people have all sorts of visions and dreams. They see angels. No doubt, there are people who follow *moving stars* (as well as *movie stars*)!

But the problem with any “New Age spirituality” is that every spiritual encounter is accepted *without* question or evaluation. Personal experience is the only way people judge if something is true or false. (My nephews and nieces went off to a church on Sunday afternoon where some perplexing styles of spirituality were expressed and encouraged. Sadly, the only basis to evaluate these experiences was personal taste! Did it make you feel good?)

The wise men, on the other hand, evaluated their “reading of the heavens” against the “reading of a Book”. Sure, they were open to a new spiritual experience as they followed the star westward. But it wasn’t the “star” or the planets alone that convinced these men to make their trip. As their words to King Herod indicate, they knew the ancient prophecies found in the Book of Micah. (verses 5 and 6-- ***“As the prophet has written: ⁶ “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”***) The heavenly sign was interpreted by the Scriptures.

The Magi also recognised (from these same Scriptures) that, although this Messianic child would become "The King of the Jews", His rule would not be limited to Israel or the Jewish people. Rather, His rule would bring God’s justice and peace *to the whole world*. The Magi listened to God’s Word and allowed it to shape their interpretation of the heavenly sign. As with the Magi, may God brings us new spiritual experiences in this new year, but may they all be shaped, understood and evaluated through the lens of His Word.

And this leads me to the fourth reason why, in 2014, I want to be more like the Magi. **They had a big vision of Jesus!**

What today’s passage tells me most about the Magi is that they caught (and retained) a vision of *the universal rule* of Jesus. This is the same vision that causes Matthew to bring his Gospel to a climax in chapter 28 as Jesus commissions his followers to go out and make disciples from every nation! And it’s the same vision found in chapter 7 of the Book of Revelation, where John sees a multitude too numerous to count, from every nation, race, tribe and tongue, all gathered in worship around the throne of the Lamb.

The point is that the Magi had a cosmic vision in their minds. This is the vision that propelled them to cross a continent in search of an obscure baby, the son

of Jewish peasants ...much like one would search for a needle in a haystack!
But they went because the cosmic vision of universal peace burned inside of them!

And to make this cosmic vision even more sharp, God first brought them face-to-face with the antithesis of the very King that they were seeking. When they met King Herod, they encountered the false king of the Jews; the one who used earthly power and wealth to get what he wanted, instead of the power of truth and grace. But the Magi, with cosmic discernment, quickly moved on, refusing to give Herod any more information as to the whereabouts of the true King of kings.

Yes, I want to be more like the Magi. I want to be spiritually aware; bold enough to put my spiritual insights into action; open to new spiritual experiences but discerning enough to have them governed by the Scriptures; and I want to have such a cosmic vision of Jesus and His Kingdom that I will turn my back on the Herods of this life that seek to detour and distract me and, instead, place all my full hope, all my trust, all my devotion at the feet of this King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 2014, I want to be more like these strange visitors, the Magi.

Let's pray.