

Worship at Home, Sunday 19 December 2021

Welcome to Worship at Home for 19th December, the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

An **Invitation to Worship**. The Lord comes. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. Praise be to the Lord. Praise be to his glorious name for ever. May the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen. (Ps 72: 17-19)

Our **Reading** is Matthew 2: 1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi[a] from the east came to Jerusalem 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.'

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

"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."[b]

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Our **Hymn** this time is Singing the Faith, no. 330: 'Joy to the world'

Joy to the World; the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.

Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.

Reflection

So often, the coming of the Wise Men to worship the baby Jesus is not given the prominence it should have, and thinking about it is delayed until Epiphany Sunday on 6 January, but there is no reason why we should not look at it today.

That story of the Wise Men coming to worship the baby Jesus is so familiar. But there are some details in the story that are quite puzzling. First, how many were there? We all know there were three. But we only infer that from the number of the gifts they brought. They could have been two, four, whatever. And where did Matthew get the story from? It's not in any of the other gospels. But let's look at the story...

The Wise Men do not enter the Christmas story as true believers. They are astrologers...
'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have

come to worship him.' But something happened to them when they found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

When they returned home after worshipping the baby Jesus, there is something to note that we do not always notice: they went home as changed people. Their experience had so touched them. Had they seen something they had never seen before? We do not know their inner feelings. But they were changed people. They were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, but they returned to their country by another route. Some translations say explicitly that it was a God-given dream. The star then disappeared from the story. They had ceased to be believers in astrology and had become believers in God. They realised that Herod was an evil man with evil intentions and wanted to have no more dealings with him. So they went home a different way as changed people. And they disappear from history. Or did they?

Perhaps in their own lands they established some of the ancient churches of the East that still exist today. And the memory of them remains elsewhere. In more modern days relics attributed to them appeared in Cologne and are kept in a shrine there in the cathedral, with its three spires, which is dedicated to them. And in Bristol, yes in Bristol, there is a chapel in some almshouses that is dedicated to the Three Kings of Cologne. It's at the top of Christmas Steps.

The Wise Men were filled with wonder at what they saw and were changed people. And Christmas gives us an opportunity to be amazed once again at the appearing of God's Son among us.

We come to our **time of prayer**. Let us pray.

We thank you, Lord, that the story of the birth of Jesus still touches us today, as the actual event touched the Wise Men. Let us never cease to wonder at the amazing story of how you entered human history and still live today by your Holy Spirit in our hearts.

We remember, Lord, that Jesus was born into a fallen world to bring it back to you, which he is still doing today, and that we are part of that process by our commitment to him, including our praying - and so we pray now...

Lord, we thank you for all those who by their example have brought us to you – parents, family, friends, ministers, others. Help us in our turn, by our example, to draw others to you through our activities, priorities, and otherwise.

Lord, shine your Christmas light, **give your peace to all people**.

Lord, we think of those places where there is conflict – Yemen, Afghanistan, the Polish/Belarus border, and elsewhere. We think of those working for the relief of human need. Strengthen them in their work. Lord, shine your Christmas light, **give your peace to all people**.

Lord, we think of those whose Christmas is not going to be what they would have desired: because they will be alone, cut off from loved ones because of restrictions, the memory of loved ones no longer with them, serious illness, heavy burdens of love and care for those close to them. Bless and comfort them, we pray, as we name them now...[pause]...

Lord, shine your Christmas light, **give your peace to all people**.

Lord, we know that you hear your prayers, and will answer them according to your perfect will. Thank you. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Light of the World. **Amen**.

An Advent Blessing.

Jesus, you travel alongside us when we are weary,
you light our way when we walk in the darkness,
you fill us with hope,

so that we and everyone may walk in the light of the glory of God.

And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us and remain with us this Christmas time, into the New Year and in the coming days. **Amen**.

Revd Tony Coates