

## Epiphany: Matthew 2:1-12

3 January 2020. Online and CCO

Father, we ask that we might learn true wisdom from you, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we are celebrating the Epiphany, the visit of the three wise men to the baby Jesus. Officially, the date of the Epiphany is 6<sup>th</sup> January but this is the closest Sunday. The word epiphany comes from the Greek and means an appearance, a manifestation, or a sudden moment of understanding and realisation. In a Christian context, it is what someone has called 'a spiritual ah-ha! moment', what we might think of as the penny dropping. For St Matthew, it is the moment when it becomes clear that Jesus is for everyone, not just for Jews.

We are all so familiar with this strange story: the men who travel from a country far away, following a remarkable star, bringing gifts for a king, thinking they will find the new king in the palace where the present king, Herod, spooked by their words, plans to get rid of this newborn threat to his power; they find the baby king, present their gifts, and they worship him, on their knees; then they listen to the guidance God gives them in a dream and steer clear of Herod, leaving without telling Herod who they found and where he was.

Just 12 little Bible verses, but a complete story, packed full of important information for us, over 2,000 years later. As we know, over the years, tradition has elaborated on the original Bible story: the wise men became kings, presumably because of the valuable gifts they brought. Matthew doesn't tell us how many wise men there were, but the fact that three gifts are mentioned has meant that we now think there were three men who came. But these are details and not so important.

What I think IS important is that we call them WISE men. The original word magi was used of men who had studied the science of their day, most often astrologers, observing the pattern and movement of

stars and planets. They were clever, intelligent men, with far more knowledge and understanding of the world around them than most people had. We might think their knowledge was somewhat limited in comparison with what we know now. But the important thing about these magi is that they combined knowledge with something else, something hugely important for us all. WISDOM.

Chiselled into the stone around the main building of my university college were the words: Get knowledge, get riches, but with all thy getting, get understanding. I saw those words day after day, and even at 18, I realised that they were saying something very important. We all know that knowledge is important and a real help to us in life. We all know that riches can make life very pleasant for us. But on their own, they are not enough.

I'm sure we have all come across people who clearly have a lot of knowledge, who come across as very clever, very persuasive. Even celebrities, even leaders of some of the nations. But very often, when we look more closely, we find that these same people seem to lack what we call basic common sense. They might blind us with science, or be really quick-witted and able to make everyone laugh, but when we look at their lives, we often think 'Hmmm, I'm not so sure about that.' It would not be right for me to give you the examples that spring into my mind, but I have no doubt you will supply your own!

The point is, that what these people seem to lack is UNDERSTANDING and GOOD JUDGEMENT, or, as the Bible would put it, WISDOM. The wisdom that characterises these wise men of the Epiphany. What is it that reveals their wisdom?

They have studied the stars, seen something extraordinary, and they want to find out what it MEANS; they want to understand.

They just keep going, even when they don't know exactly where they will end up or what they will find. They persevere.

They are not afraid to ask others (in this case Herod) for help in their quest. They don't try to be totally self-reliant.

And remember, Herod was king of the Jews; these men had come from the East, from the region of Babylon, the old empire that had utterly conquered the Jews and carried them off into exile as prisoners and slaves. Our wise men show no prejudice, no sense of superiority.

When they reach the goal of their journey, they have the discernment, the understanding as to what it is they are seeing; although they are clearly men of high social status themselves, they are not too proud to pay homage, to worship one who is greater than themselves, even though he is in the form of a tiny baby.

They are open and alert to the promptings of God, when he speaks to them through a dream, and they are obedient.

So, to summarise: their wisdom comprises  
A desire to learn and to understand  
Perseverance  
The willingness to be helped by others  
Freedom from racial prejudice  
Humility  
Listening to God  
Obedience to God.

Oh that we might all have that wisdom! Wisdom is one of God's greatest gifts, and one that we should all ask for. It is hugely important in our Bible. Remember how pleased God was when King Solomon asked for the gift of wisdom so that he might govern the people of Israel with justice and righteousness? Indeed, in the Old Testament, Wisdom is seen as being like the Word, the logos, of John's Gospel:

For even one who is perfect among us will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you.

With you is wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world; she understands what is pleasing in your sight and what is right according to your commandments.

<sup>10</sup> Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may labour at our side, and that we may learn what is pleasing to you.

<sup>11</sup> For she knows and understands all things, and she will guide us wisely in our actions and guard us with her glory. (from Wisdom 9, as in Common Worship, a Song of Wisdom, p 599)

And in his epistle, James writes: The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (James 3:17)

I said earlier that I was sure we could all call to mind examples of people who, despite a high profile, lack wisdom. I am sure too that we can think of someone we know or have known who was full of this godly wisdom. You might like to spend a little while thinking about them and what it was that made you recognise the wisdom in them. Then you, like me, might want to pray and ask God to give you his wisdom in the year ahead. Amen.