

Reading: Matthew Chapter 2 verses 1 – 12

² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ 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. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what 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.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.”

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Reflection

How many of us, I wonder – despite the difficulties of in-town shopping managed to find presents to give to others this Christmas? How did that make you feel? Is that dependent upon seeing the other person open the present in front of you?

Does how you feel about that change if you think the present hasn’t arrived – perhaps lost in transit? What if the person for whom you bought the present decides not to open it at Christmas – but rather to leave it – perhaps on a shelf or in a cupboard – to another time or, perhaps worse still, decide not to open the present at all. Of course, we may never know whether the present gets opened or not. Jesus is God’s presence to us. In choosing that present, he has carefully thought about our needs and the very best way to meet that need.

However, the significance of Jesus – whether we receive him as God’s present – is entirely dependent upon us. It is our choice based upon our faith and whether we are prepared to hear the Gospel stories and alongside the writings in the Letters from Paul, Peter & John and take in what they tell us about Jesus. However, hearing words is one thing, understanding them and taking them to heart so that we give them any credence – believe them – is another matter. I wonder how that makes God feel? Does he feel that he has bought us the best present ever – and the mostly costly (with the price being paid on the cross) – only for those for whom he chose it to ignore it and treat it as if it doesn’t matter at all? Whether we accept Jesus as the Son of God born in a humble stable to save us from our sins by going to the cross for us is entirely up to us. But it is clear choice – we can either accept the gift and recognise who Jesus is or we can ignore or reject Jesus all together. And only we can make that choice – God can’t make it for us.

Our reading from Matthew’s Gospel tells us of the arrival of the Magi. They saw the star arise in the east and decided to follow through two long years across the desert. And yet they did it willingly recognising the importance of the star. When they came to Jerusalem, they sought out the baby – even if that did mean causing Herod to panic when asked about a baby born to be King of the Jews. Once they got to Bethlehem, they carefully sought out Mary and Joseph and so came across the young boy – aged about 2 years old at this stage. They knelt down before Jesus and gave to him the gifts that they brought with them: Gold to show that he was a King; Frankincense to show that he was of divine origin; and myrrh to show that he was a priest. Having offered to him their praise and worship, they made their way home – but not by going back to Herod.

What of us, I wonder? The carol 'It came upon the midnight clear' ends by talking about the Wise men doing their part and shepherds giving Jesus a lamb. What is that we can bring to Jesus? Do we have anything valuable enough to give to the Son of God. In some ways the obvious answer is no. There is nothing really that we can offer to him. But, on another level, all we can offer to Jesus is ourselves. We come to him empty-handed but we can offer to him ourselves – our heart as the carol puts it. What God – what Jesus – really wants is for us to do just that. He doesn't want us to claim that we have anything except ourselves to offer. We can pledge ourselves to worship him for who he is and what he has done on the cross for us. We can pledge ourselves to follow his call to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. The cost of doing so is massive – it means saying that the will of God for us (which incidentally is far better than anything we might plan for ourselves) is the better option and accept that. To do so means surrendering our will to his. When we do, God will use us in ways that we could never imagine. It might mean us helping others in his name – make the love of God for all know to all by acts of loving kindness.

Are we prepared to do that? Are we ready to pledge ourselves in his service? If we do, we will find that what he gives us in return – eternal life secured through Jesus' blood on the cross and his resurrection from the dead – is far more valuable than anything we can offer in return. Above all, like the Magi may we come to worship at Jesus' feet and proclaim him to be King of kings, Lord of lords, God's Messiah and Saviour.