

Saviour King

Sermon for Epiphany by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James 2016

Key Bible passages: Matthew 2.1 – 12, Isaiah 60.1 – 6

A couple of months ago I was one who found himself outside Tawa College when walking. A number of others had gathered, and on enquiring I was reminded that this was the visit of a likely future king of England and head of the Commonwealth. Pretty awesome really - that a person of such high rank would come to a small suburb, not especially significant many thousands of kilometres of where he lives.

It reminded me also of an experience some years back in Christchurch and the Pope was coming to visit. I thought here was one opportunity I might actually see him. I didn't go to the gathering though at the Queen Elizabeth Park but stopped on a street on the way from where he was staying. Got out of my car and waited. No one else was standing there, and as the cavalcade drove past I waved – and the Pope waved back! How awesome was that!

Such experiences have some parallels with today's gospel event. Here people possibly three special ones plus their entourage go to visit a humble family living in a small town in a small country ruled by a powerful nation. But they were no ordinary visitors. They were magi and likely of high rank, bringing with them such expensive gifts as gold and frankincense. Yet their mission was of significance both in the action and the symbolism of the visit and the gifts given.

This morning's Sermon is entitled '*Saviour King*'. The action is of the magi but the relevance is of the one who was visited and to whom the visitors paid homage. Thus you are invited to focus on three aspects of this gospel event. They can be summed up in three words: identity, gifts, journey.

First, *identity*. Who were these visitors from the east as Matthew relates in his gospel? Kings? No despite the influence of the carol 'We three Kings or orient are.' Nor the verse from Isaiah 63: Kings shall come to the brightness of your rising.' The Greek word is magi. The Greek writer Herodotus earlier wrote magi followed a religion which worshipped heavenly bodies and possessed the power to interpret dreams. It is not known what they saw in the stars, possibly the conjunction of planets, or the rising of a special star some think Sirius which symbolised the birth of an important person. It was of sufficient importance to embark of a journey of some two years to visit and pay homage. Not surprising then that these magi held status and influence in their home country. It was appropriate then in the search for a king these ones would go to King Herod in the first instance. He consults and is reminded of the Scripture about Bethlehem the likely place. Anyway the magi track down the house where Jesus and his family presently are, and we know what followed.

The matter of *identity* has symbolism. The shepherds, humble and likely poor and not especially liked represent the message of Jesus to those in poverty and living humbly. The magi symbolise the message to those who are of high rank, one might say the upper classes of society. The early followers of Jesus were mostly of humble background, although there were ones who did have means. We read of that in Luke where he notes some women 'who provided for the disciples from out of their resources.' (Luke 8.3). St Paul was mindful of distinctions in society in his day as he wrote to the Corinthians 'Consider your call, brothers and sisters, not many of you

were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth....' We might place ourselves in that category. We haven't got to it yet in a current TV Documentary series on History Channel 'From Christ to Constantine.' It surely is amazing that the influence and call of Christianity eventually got to the highest ranking person in the Roman world becoming a believer.

How important it is that the gospel is presented to those of higher rank and status and indeed affluence in our own day. It is noteworthy that some who have so much are becoming more philanthropic and helping major medical projects in Third World countries. I've not known many but some I have met have dilemmas about the ethics of what they do with all they have amassed – of their own or family money. Perhaps there's an underlying awareness that they can't take it with them from this earthly life. The ministry and contacts of ones like bishops who mix with those persons have an important ministry. Prayer is also important for them also, as Paul wrote to Timothy – 'I urge that prayersbe made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions....(1 Tim 2.1) so that we may live a godly and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.'

2) Second, *gifts*. This is such a lovely feature of Christmas, giving and receiving gifts. What is significant in the gospel story is that the gifts in the gospel story would appear to have symbolic significance. *Gold* would surely be worthy of a gift for a king – just as is noted in the Psalm, of King Solomon: 'Long may he live, may gold of Sheba be given him.' From a practical standpoint, gold would always have been useful, providing funding perhaps for the holy family to get to Egypt in the persecution of innocent children after the magi had returned from the visit. Then *frankincense* – this is representative of the religious tradition into which Jesus was born. There's a link in this morning's Old Testament reading: 'They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. (Is.60.6). Frankincense wasn't common and was very much valued and hence its use in special services, such as when Zechariah went into the holy of holies to offer worship, leading to his encounter with the angel giving notice of the birth of John the Baptist.

Myrrh is an aromatic resin, sap from a small thorny tree growing in arid lands and used as a perfume, incense and medicine. Symbolically it is associated with both kingship and of embalming for burial. Psalm 45 praises the king 'your robes are all fragrant with myrrh, and aloes and cassia..' There's a strong association with myrrh as one of the spices and ointments prepared by the women for embalming Jesus' body after he was brought down from the cross. The symbolism here is of the one who would suffer and be Saviour. The magi couldn't have known this and yet in God's providence this points to Jesus' destiny. Just as those prophetic words of Simeon to Mary were so poignant: 'A sword will pierce your own soul too, referring to her given to be at the foot of the cross of her son.

Considering then the three gifts offered to Jesus he is recognised as *Saviour King*, the title of my sermon, and worthy of our praise.

3) *Journeying*. The story of the people of God is rich with journeys. Beginning with Abraham and his family travelling to a land YHWH would reveal to him. Then there was Moses and leading the people out of Egypt in the Exodus, and the epic 40 years in the wilderness before getting to the promised land. The return from Exile in

Babylon was also significant. Then in the story of the early Christians Paul's missionary journeys make up a large part of the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters to those places he visited also provide substance to the content of the New Testament. At this time of the year in the church's calendar there are several accounts of journeys related to the *birth narrative* – Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the census and birth of the Saviour. The visit of the magi probably taking a couple of years, and then what must have been the long and arduous travel of the holy family down to Egypt and then the return. What seems in common in these is the divine hand unfolding purpose in the journey. This was in different ways, for Moses an extraordinary holy ground experience with the burning bush. YHWH's message to Abraham was to 'go..'. The journeying events of the birth of Jesus narratives included prompting by dreams, and of the magi interpreting a sign in the skies.

What are we to make of this? Surely there will be ones here who have made journeys, perhaps leaving one's home town to live and work in a different place. Certainly that's been my experience with having ministered in 4 cities, leaving Auckland for Christchurch, then Dunedin and to Wellington. With such upheaval for family certainly prayer guiding was a key factor in the moves. I especially remember being alerted to a move by a verse of the Psalms when a move from Christchurch was imminent. Such were 'macro moves'.

We can also take a 'micro view' of journeying, as we move into 2016. Where will the journey of our life take you this year? Might God have something to do with what unfolds? I'm a 'journeyer' and love travel and creativity, so I look forward with anticipation to what will be. It reminds me of a quote I came across when going on the voyage to the Southern Ocean: 'One does not discover new lands without consenting to leave sight of the shore....' How might that apply to our *spiritual journey*? Each of us is on this in our walk with God. What new possibilities might God open for you in 2016? I consider that's far more exciting than making New Year Resolutions – which are so often forgotten once one gets back to daily living after the holidays. Perhaps what is in common between the birth narrative journeys and ours is that we don't quite know where we are headed. So one trusts in divine providence. How and in what way will God lead you? We need to bear in mind at times the journey may be tough going, whether it be health issues or family setbacks or needs to which we must attend. Yet how important to persevere and seek to discern the leading and what challenges to overcome!

In concluding, may I share a favourite scripture verse in this context and one on which I trust, from Ephesians 2: 'We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'