

CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL

Fredericton, NB

Sunday, January 4, 2003

celebrating The Epiphany

Sermon by Dean Keith Joyce

Matthew 2:1-12 [New English Translation]

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, in the time of King Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem ²saying, “Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴After assembling all the chief priests and experts in the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem of Judea,” they said, “for it is written this way by the prophet:

⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are in no way least among the rulers of Judah,
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod privately summoned the wise men and determined from them when the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and look carefully for the child. When you find him, inform me so that I can go and worship him as well.” ⁹After listening to the king they left, and once again the star they saw when it rose led them until it stopped above the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star they shouted joyfully. ¹¹As they came into the house and saw the child with Mary his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. They opened their treasure boxes and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²After being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back by another route to their own country.

It has been a long journey. They're tired and hungry. Yet they can't wait to ask the people they meet the question that had driven them to make this strenuous trip: “*Where is the one who is born king of the Jews?*” They go on to explain that they had seen a sign in the heavens that has brought them here to Jerusalem, the capital city, where surely this king of the Jews must live. They have one purpose in mind – they have come to worship him.

The news of this search by the visiting strangers spreads throughout Jerusalem. Before long it reaches the palace itself and King Herod is disturbed by what he hears. Quickly he calls in the religious leaders and experts in the law and asks where this king was to be born. The well-known answer is not long coming; the Messiah, the Christ, was to be born in Bethlehem, the Bethlehem of Judea, near Jerusalem and not the one up in the north, in Galilee. All along it has been expected that the Messiah would come from the line of David and therefore would come from King David's ancestral geographical area.

Secretly, King Herod summons the several wise men. He wants to know when the miraculous sign of the star had appeared. It would tell him potentially when the new king had been born. Immediately he sends the wise men off to Bethlehem. There's no use in hiding a well fact. And this steers the wise men in the right direction. It doesn't take too long to make the 5-mile journey. When they arrive in Bethlehem they're delighted beyond words

to see once again the star that had started them out on their search. This is tremendous confirmation they're in the right place.

Finally, now in Bethlehem, they find where Jesus is living. He no longer is the newborn infant of the manger. They go into the house where they see him with Mary, his mother. Seemingly instinctively, without hesitation, they're on their faces before the child Jesus, worshipping the king they have travelled so far to find. Unhesitatingly, out of their treasures, the wise men give Jesus gifts of gold and incense and myrrh, gifts of great honour and celebration, for one who is king, king of the Jews and king of their hearts. Even in this most unlikely of places, a simple house in Bethlehem, these easterners recognize the presence of a king, an extraordinary king.

This is amazing! Not only is this Jewish child Jesus to be ruler and shepherd of the people of Israel, he is the Anointed one, the Christ, the Saviour of the world. This is the significant reality that the first century Christians would have understood when first reading this Gospel of Matthew. These men who have come from so far away are not Jews. They are Gentiles. Their actions and acclamations point to the truth that this Jesus is for the whole human race. He's not just a local wonder boy, let alone a local deity. He's not just for one grouping of people; he's for all nations. This is stunning news! This is life-giving news! This is good news for the world, for you, for me, for all of humanity.

How long and hard do we search out our Lord? We see his light, we know of his star. This is still the best news even though we have become so accustomed to it. The journeys we are on can be long and hard, yet we know the end of the journey because he has come and is now with us by his Holy Spirit. In the joy and challenge of the search, we are to seek him out afresh, in the midst of all the competing alternatives around us. And he is always the unexpected, like that boy in the house in Bethlehem – that will never change. This child in the line of David never really fits in with the social, and religious, conventions of the day and rarely does he behave in the accepted manner of a king and of the saviour.

That's why he's always good news for all people. No matter what our condition is we can find him there with us. And while he is king of kings, and most holy, he is the true life-giving companion that our heart longs for because he is also our friend and our brother. He is flesh of our flesh; he is very much of the world we inhabit.

In worship, as we bow before him, this child of the house in Bethlehem and yet who before time flung the stars into space, we are to open up the treasures of our lives that come with us on our journey. Out of our treasures we are to give him the best of what we have. What is the gold of our lives, whether it is an aspect of our being or something of our possessions? May our worship and love of him be so deep, so full, that we would think of giving him no less than the best of who we are and of what we claim as ours. What do we find in us and about us and around us that has the wonderful and sweet fragrance of incense and myrrh? Let's give it to our Incarnate Lord, the Lord of the nations, the Lord of our hearts.

As we enter this New Year, let us, in a new way, and with a new determination, seek out our Lord. It's not, of course, as if he is lost and we have to find him all over again, or as if we have never known him. Rather, let us make the ongoing discovery of this child of Bethlehem, the Christ the primary objective of our living and of our hopes. There is no higher purpose for life. May the king the wise men were determined to find be the clear focus of our searching as we journey through the pains and wonders of our lives and of our world. And as we discover him more fully, as Saviour and friend and Lord, may he have ever-greater influence on our lives and in our Church.

Then, in his name and in his companionship may we seek generously to give ourselves to his cause, to share his peace, his justice, his mercy, his grace with the world he came to heal and restore as that perfect creation of God. And may we, like those wise men of old, not give up, and not be dissuaded by the deceptions of the powers of this world no matter where he leads us, and to serve him wherever he takes us. In the sign of the assurance of his presence, we, too, like the wise men, will be overjoyed. And in our joy we will know the delight, the privilege, of worshipping him and loving him with all that we are, now and forever.