



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Epiphany Ephesians 3:1-12 & St. Matthew 2:1-12 Fr. William Klock

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Imagine the magi, the wisemen, on their long trek from “the East”—from Persia—to Judah. They followed the trade routes through deserts and through cities, through mountains and across rivers for weeks. Oasis to oasis, city to city, village to village to make their way to Jerusalem, to King Herod’s palace, and eventually to Bethlehem. And they carried those expensive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were astrologers and they had seen a star. They knew all the stars, but this one was different. I wish we knew what made it so different, but we’ll have to wait to find that out. However they worked it out, that star told them the King of the Jews had been born, and so they made this long trek, not just to visit this new king, but to worship him.

Now, consider that Jesus was hardly the first King of the Jews, but as far as we know, no Persian magi ever visited those others when they were born. Something extraordinary had happened this time. Maybe these men had studied the Israelite prophets. It’s not a stretch to think that they’d met Jews and heard of their scriptures. However they knew it, these men knew—again—that something extraordinary had happened, so they came to pay homage to this foreign king. In the ancient Near East that meant that they worshipped the king’s god. Maybe they knew, maybe the star was heralding the birth of Israel’s God in human flesh. They had to know something, otherwise it makes no sense. Judah was a conquered nation. The King of the Jews was a loser—and so was his god. That’s

how people in that world thought. But somehow these men knew—I wish Matthew had been more specific—but somehow these men knew that this was no ordinary king. And so they made this long trek to honour him and to give glory to his god. It was an *epiphany*: God made manifest in Jesus. First to his own people, represented by the shepherds we read about on Christmas, and now made manifest to the *gentiles*, represented by these kings from the East.

We’ll come back to magi and to our Gospel, but first, listen again to St. Paul in our Epistle, Ephesians 3, as he writes to his brothers and sisters in Ephesus:

It is because of all of this that I, Paul, a prisoner of Messiah Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...

Ephesus was a predominantly gentile church that Paul had started when he visited the city on his second missionary journey. Now he’s writing to them some years later as he sits in prison, having been arrested for proclaiming the good news about Jesus. He goes on:

—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me to pass on to you, how the secret purpose of God was made know to me, as I wrote briefly just now. Anyway... When you read this, you’ll be able to understand the special insight I have into the Messiah’s secret. This wasn’t made known to human beings in previous generations, but now it has been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. *The secret is this: that through the gospel, the gentiles are to share Israel’s inheritance. They are to become fellow members of the body, along with them, and fellow sharers of the promise in Jesus the Messiah.*

This was, as we say, Paul’s “thing”. This was for him the great secret or mystery—the great, earth-shattering

revelation that changes everything. We might say an “epiphany”. For Paul the great secret was first the revelation that Jesus really was the Messiah, but then when he’d had the chance to work through all the implications of that great truth he was confronted with this one: “the gentiles are to share Israel’s inheritance. They are to become fellow members of the body, along with them, and fellow sharers of the promise in Jesus the Messiah.” Most people would have thought this was a thoroughly un-Jewish thing to say. Even that it was blasphemy that gentiles—unclean dogs!—were coheirs with the people of God. A few of them, sure, but only after they’d been purified and circumcised and committed to observing *torah*. And then they weren’t really gentiles anymore. But Paul’s realised that, in fact, once you get the story of God and Israel straight, it would be hard to come up with anything more Jewish than this conclusion that the gentiles are, in Jesus, fellow heirs, members of the same body, and part of Abraham’s family. This is what the story was working towards all along, even though hardly anyone realised it anymore. As he says as he continues, ministering *this* truth was his calling:

This is the gospel that I was appointed to serve, in line with the free gift of God’s grace that was given to me. It was backed up with the power through which God accomplishes his work. I am the very least of all God’s people. However, he gave me this task as a gift: that I should be the one to tell the gentiles the good news of the Messiah’s riches, riches no one could begin to count. My job is to make clear to everyone just what the secret plan is, the purpose that’s been hidden from the very beginning of the world in God who created all things. This is it: that God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, was to be made known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places—through the church! This was God’s eternal purpose, and he’s

accomplished it in Jesus the Messiah, our Lord. We have confidence, and access to God, in full assurance, through his faithfulness.

The Jews of Paul's day had got their own story wrong and no longer had any sense that "salvation is for the Gentiles". As far as they were concerned, *they* were God's people, God cared about *them*, God would deliver *them* from their oppressors and put *them* on top, and one day he would rain down destruction on all the unclean people of the world. Salvation was *for* the Jews, they might have said. Even those first Jewish Christians were still thinking in this vein. Jesus was *their* Messiah. There were a few gentiles who believed, but they had to first become Jews. And there were the Samaritans who believed. That was a challenge to this kind of thinking, but until Paul, no one seemed to have this vision of the deliverance, of the salvation of the Gentiles—at least not on a large scale.

The irony is that today we've made the opposite mistake. We've so dehistoricised, flattened out, and universalised the story that we've all but forgotten that "Salvation is *from* the Jews." "Salvation is from the Jews." That's what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman and it ought to ring in our ears too. Those words ought to remind us of the great story of the God of Israel and his people. St. Paul writes in today's Epistle to explain his unique apostolic ministry to proclaim the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. It has been my experience that many Christians have never stopped to consider just how odd Paul's ministry would have seemed at the time. They've never stopped to think, because we have largely removed the gospel from its narrative and historical context and we've unnecessarily flattened it out to communicate its universal nature. Sometime we need to stop and remember that, even though "God so loved the world," it is also true that

"salvation is from the Jews". That might not seem important, but think again of the big story. Out of a world that had lost all knowledge of him, the Lord chose and called *Abraham* and from him created *a people* whom he made holy and in whose midst he lived. He gave *this* people his law and his presence and made them unique amongst the nations. And he *promised* that through *them* he would save his whole creation. So Jesus was born a Jew—one of those special people. He was the Jewish Messiah. He fulfilled the Jewish law and the words of the Jewish prophets. He proclaimed good news about a coming kingdom and a coming judgement to Jews and for Jews. And while gentiles were welcomed when they came to him, he made it clear that his ministry was to his own people. The evangelists lay the blame for Jesus' death with Jews. The gentiles had their part in it—hinting that they would eventually also have a share in his salvation—but it was Jesus' own people who betrayed him and demanded his death. Even in his death by crucifixion, Jesus foreshadowed the means of execution that the unrepentant Jewish rebels would face when judgement came a generation later. Jesus literally took the death of his people on himself in that sense. It cannot be stressed enough that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, lived and died for the sake of the Jews and to bring their story to its climax *in fulfilment of God's promises*.

We can't just skip all that to get to John's announcement that God so loved the world that he gave his Son, *because when we do that, we short-circuit the story, we leave out most or all of the bits that show us how God, in Jesus, has been faithful to his promises made under the old covenant*. And in that, we cast a veil over his glory. It was necessary for Jesus to fulfil the story of his own people, because only then would the Gentiles see the faithfulness of Israel's God, be drawn to what they saw, give him glory, and in the process be

incorporated into the new people of God by faith. In this, too, we see that the means by which the Gentiles are incorporated into the new Israel fulfils the message of Israel's prophets and glorifies the Lord. While it is certainly true that a dehistoricised and flattened gospel has brought millions to the Lord Jesus, it is also true that communicating the gospel within its context better communicates *the faithfulness of God as the basis for our own faith* with a greater depth and builds upon a firm foundation. In contrast, our evangelism today, rather than centring on proclaiming the faithfulness of God, is centred on our needs and wants. Our culture is obsessed with the therapeutic, with feeling good and so we've tailored our gospel. And it's not wrong to talk about what God, in Jesus, does for us, but if that's the focus, we end up with a small and truncated gospel. Brothers and Sisters, when we get the gospel the right way round; when we make the gospel about the faithfulness of God revealed in Jesus, the gospel is so much bigger, so much greater—so much more powerful. What we see in Paul's ministry—and what we see especially in Revelation—is the gentile nations being drawn to the God of Israel by the revelation of his glory in Jesus the Messiah. In the New Testament, the gentiles come to Jesus, because in him they see a God who is faithful and worthy of glory—a God unlike anything or anyone known in the pagan world. Again, Christians today need to understand just how weird Paul's ministry would have seemed in his day—even, at first, to the other apostles. Again, most believed that the good news about the Jewish Messiah was for other Jews, and of little interest (or even relevance) to gentiles. Jesus radically changed what it meant to be the people of God, but in many respects, it was not until St. Paul emerged from his wilderness sojourn that this dramatic change was really grasped by the fledgling Church.

Of course, Israel's ministry to the Gentiles was there all along. The Lord set Israel apart before the watching nations. She was to be his witness. Through her he would restore and reconcile humanity to himself. But as Paul points out in our Epistle, this "mystery" was largely lost on Israel. And yet there it was from the beginning, all the way back in Abraham's day—if anyone was paying really close attention—that the Lord's intent was to one day bring the Gentiles into his family and to make them fellow heirs with those who were children by birth rather than adoption. This truth had been revealed by the Spirit to the prophets of old and, in the same way, had been revealed to the apostles—who took some time to parse it out—and to Paul it was a personal commission: to proclaim the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. Paul adds here that this mission is not simply to ordinary people, nor is it a matter of personal piety. As Gentile believers come into their inheritance in the Messiah, the Church becomes both a witness and a challenge to the rulers of the Gentile world. This diverse body of Jews and Gentiles of every sort, living in unity the inheritance given them by Jesus, announces that he is Lord and that a new age is breaking in. Just as was the case with Israel, the lords of the earth can submit in faith to the lordship of Jesus or face the judgement to come.

Now, let's go back to today's Gospel, Matthew 2:1-12, which dovetails with what Paul has written in the Epistle. Here's the truth that Paul writes, manifest in the story of Jesus. Matthew writes:

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, at the time when Herod was king, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the East. Where is the one," they asked, "who has been born to be king of the Jews? We have seen his star rising in the east and we have come to worship him." When King Herod

heard this, he was very disturbed and the whole of Jerusalem was as well. He called together all the chief priests and scribes of the people and inquired from them where the Messiah was to be born.

"In Bethlehem of Judaea," they replied. "That's what it says in the prophet:

'You, Bethlehem, in Judah's land Are not the least of Judah's princes;

From out of you will come the ruler

Who will shepherd Israel my people.'

Then Herod called the wise men to him in secret. He found out from them precisely when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem. "Go," he said, "and make a thorough search for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I can come and worship him.

When they heard what the king said, they set off. There was the star, the one they had seen rising in the east, going ahead of them. It went and stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were beside themselves with joy and excitement. They went into the house and saw the child, with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. They opened their treasure chests and gave him presents: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by a different way.

While St. Luke recalls the events of the night Jesus was born and shows us the shepherds visiting one of their own, one who will follow in the footsteps of David as both king and shepherd, St. Matthew tells of Jesus' birth in passing and puts all the emphasis on Jesus as King. Wise men, these astrologers from the East, have seen a heavenly sign that heralds the birth of a king in Israel. They desire to worship him and to give him

gifts. As I said earlier, they knew that this was no ordinary king. There had been no star heralding Herod's birth.

So naturally, they looked for the King of the Jews in Jerusalem. Herod knew nothing of the birth of a king, but was politically astute enough to recognise the political nature of the magi's claim and paranoid enough to take action. Matthew makes it clear that if Jesus is indeed the King, then Herod was not. Again, Matthew emphasises the kingship of Jesus in the report of the priests to Herod. They cite Micah 5:2—and it's not clear if this is their paraphrase or Matthew's—but they point Herod to Bethlehem. And yet, in the paraphrase we see again an important bit of context. Micah speaks, not of a universal king per se, but of one who will be king over Israel. This king will shepherd the Lord's flock—a bit from verse 4 that the priests add to their paraphrase of verse 2. The Messiah is the King of Israel. It is only once Micah has established that the Messiah will be King over Israel that he goes on to tell us that this King "shall be great to the ends of the earth" (5:4). Both the Magi and the priests highlight Jesus' kingship specifically over Israel. Again, "salvation is from the Jews". It is *because* Jesus is King of Israel, in fulfilment of the Lord's promises through the prophets, that the good news about him goes out to the Gentiles. The magi are the first, who foreshadow the future. Matthew bookends his Gospel with Gentiles. Here the magi come at Jesus' birth, Gentiles come to worship a very uniquely Jewish king and to give him glory. And at the end of the Gospel, Matthew records the commissioning of the disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations". The good news is only good news to the Gentiles because it reveals that the God of Israel is unlike the gods of the nations: he does what he says he will do and he fulfils his promises to his own. Think again of Revelation and how the nations there, the nations that worshiped the beast and frolicked with

the great prostitute, discovered in the downfall of the beast that the kings and gods of this world can't hold a candle to the God of Israel revealed in Jesus, to his power and might, and most importantly, to his faithfulness. Specifically, he fulfils his promises to his people in Jesus. It is this faithfulness just as much as the amazing report of Jesus risen from the dead and the defeat of his enemies that draws the Gentiles to give glory to the God of Israel and to submit in faith and to give their allegiance to Jesus, the King of the Jews. Of course, this carries the same ramifications for Caesar and the other rulers and gods of this age as it did for Herod. This is what Paul stresses in the final verses of our Epistle. Their days are numbered, for as the royal summons to the King goes out, Jesus "shall be great to the ends of the earth".

Brothers and Sisters, the gospel about Jesus is good news, *because* it reveals the faithfulness of God. He does what he says he will do. He fulfils his promises. He does so like no other. And that's reason for us to trust him, to give him our allegiance, to worship him and to give him glory. And to proclaim his good news to the world.

I want to close with the Collect for today, because it offers a wonderful comparison between the magi and ourselves. They were drawn to Jesus by sight and we by faith, and so we look forward in hope to the day on which we, too, will see his majesty on full display. It's the prayer of Gentiles who have seen the glory of the God of Israel revealed in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. It is a thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus, creating a new Israel in which the Gentiles are fellow heirs, and it looks forward in hope to the day in which Jesus will set the cosmos to rights and will be revealed in all his glory as both King and God.

Let's pray: O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully

grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.