

The Journey of the Three Wise Men

A sermon for a New Year (2022)

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Reading: Matthew 2, the whole chapter, read by 2 readers (below)

Mostly, when I go on journeys, I choose to go, I choose where to go, who to see, and how to get there. I like journeys. But sometimes we are forced to go on journeys not of our own choosing.

These past 2 years have taken the whole world on a journey that no one would have chosen.

As a world we are also on a journey called climate change, and it's hard to see that anyone will benefit from that. Certainly not the fish or the whales, not those who run ski fields, not farmers. We are embarked on global warming and we don't know where it will lead us.

The amazing rich multilayered story told in Matthew chapter 2 tells of two different journeys, one of which was not at all expected or chosen. It is the story of a refugee family, forced to flee because of a very real threats to their child, because of a power-hungry jealous king. That story rings all too real in our day, people fleeing a violent homeland, desperately searching for safe haven for themselves and their children.

The flight of Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt feels all too familiar to our day and age.

But the event that triggered that journey was another journey, a very different one.

The journey of the Magi, that we know as the Three Wise Men, or the Three Kings as they became known in medieval times is a most intriguing journey indeed. This morning I would like to highlight three aspects of their journey that seem to me to be relevant to us as we embark on the journey of 2022, whatever that may hold.

The first thing that strikes me about the journey of the Magi is that **the journey was both well planned and highly flexible**. Their studies pinpointed a prophecy, and identified a star in the night sky. This took years of work, leading up to a radical decision – to leave their studio, to step out of academia into the big wide world, to set off on a journey not just in theory but in person! They decided to stop reading about the momentous events of human history and to join it. They found something so important that they risked all the threats of life and limb, robbers and diseases and exhaustion, because they just could not miss this!

So they planned as best they could, provisions and transport, hired armed guards. They planned the direction from their maps as best they can. But they did not have all the information. There were fundamental gaps in their knowledge. So their plan was to ask directions as they went along. They figured that local people would know more info, that they'd find more guides as they went.

Their plan was to refine the plan along the way, by seeking more information from other people.

That actually is quite an important principle for us, in our personal lives as well as for our churches. We set off on 2022, maybe with some plans, but there is lots we don't know. We will need to ask for directions as we go. We will need to be flexible, to adapt our plans in the light of changing circumstances.

What is your church's mission plan? It is great to have plans, but change lies ahead. We just don't know yet. And that is OK. We don't need all the information in order to step out on a journey of faith. God will provide us with people we can ask, people we can talk things over with. God will go with us and nudge us in the right direction. There will be signs along the way. Mission involves both good planning and flexibility.

Which takes humility. If there is anything Covid taught us it was that plans can change. Sometimes (quite often as it turned out!) our planning gets thrown out the window, and we adapt and make the best of where we find ourselves. Like the Magi, we have to figure out a different way to travel. We sit more lightly with our own importance.

My second point is that **the Magi trusted their science and they trusted their instincts**. They were well informed, by a wide range of sources, science as well as dreams. I find it fascinating that they were so learned, with head knowledge, but also able to respond to an intuition, heart knowledge. Their formal knowledge told them to trust the King because he has all those other advisers and if anyone can access the truth of things, surely it was King Herod. But their instincts told them a different story. They somehow sensed that Herod had a dangerous hidden agenda. They stopped trusting the official line. And this was confirmed for them in a dream.

As you start in on this coming year, **what information do you trust?** This has become a huge issue for our world, with increasing distrust of official information. It seems that more people are turning away from official sources, that in the past created a sense of national cohesion, and are falling down spirals of misinformation and conspiracies. I worry about the longer term effects of a splintering of distrust of information, as we have seen with allegations of 'fake news'. If truth is no longer true, who and what do we trust? What basis do we make wise decisions?

Over the last 6 months I have joined up with NZ Christians in Science, which is a fascinating community of people with an interest in both science and the Christian faith. Leaders in this field argue that science is not opposed to faith, or theology to science, but that each needs the other if we are to truly understand this world we live in.

The Magi in Matthew 2 hold together science and faith. They were scientists, studying the stars, the earth, they had maps, they had history, they knew various languages, cultures and religions. They sought truth, and their search led them to Jesus. Isn't that rather wonderful!

I am intrigued about that dream that warned them about Herod. Did all of them have a dream? Or just one of them? Did they hear a voice from God loud and clear or did they interpret dream symbols? To me it shows the tight team-work between them, that first and foremost they trusted each other. There is no hint of conflict or hierarchy between them, no pride getting in the way of friendship and trust. They made decisions together and that was that. I like that. There is another lesson in there for the church as we set off into this year. Let's be a close team, look after each other, and trust each other implicitly.

And thirdly, what was the whole point of their journey? Often our journeys are expeditions to get something. But theirs was to give valuable stuff away. They travelled all that way to meet the child, and to give him gifts. **Their mission was to give honour**. They asked nothing whatsoever in return. What a powerful inspiration for the church's mission journey!

Too often the church sees mission as a way to get for ourselves, to get more members, to enhance our reputation in the community. The Magi model for us a profound self-giving. Mission is about honouring others, not ourselves. **Reaching out in the name of Jesus builds other people up**, meets the needs of others, not ourselves.

One aspect of this story which is quite missing - a most intriguing question – is what Mary and Joseph made of it all. What did they do with the priceless gifts they were given? There is no doubt they understood the symbolic significance of the gifts. And as Luke says about the visit of the shepherds, no doubt Mary treasured it all up in her heart. No doubt those gifts enriched her soul and prepared her for both the wonder of who her son became, and also for the terrible pain of his death. As we sing in our carols, Gold for the King of Kings, Frankincense for the great Priest and intercessor, the Son of Man standing for us before Heaven, and Myrrh for the ultimate sacrifice.

But what did she actually do with the gold, frankincense and myrrh? That the Bible does not answer. Any theories? Never mind. By the by.

The point is that the journey, like all our journeys, changed them. No doubt the Magi went home very different men. And they left their mark on everyone they met along the way.

So there are my three points, with three questions

first, can we both plan well and be flexible? Will we stop and ask for directions?

second, what information do we trust? What do we base our decisions on?

and third, are we stepping out in order to give gifts to others, to honour others?

The journey of the Magi raises some fascinating questions and pointers to inform us as we set out on the journey of this year.

I would like to finish with one of my favourite Joy Cowley prayers. Called 'A Morning Prayer', but I will change the 'day' to the 'year'.

A Morning Prayer - by Joy Cowley, *Aotearoa Psalms*

Kia ora my Friend God.

I give to you the voyage of this **year**,

that to be which is already yours,

adding to it my rejoicing,

a shout of praise. Amen. Amen.

You are the wind: fill up my sails.

You are the water: run fast beneath my keel. And I will sing in the wind

and dance over the water,

God my Friend, oh God my Friend.

You are the light: enfold me,

You are the darkness: embrace me.

You are pain: hollow me.

You are love: overflow me.

The storms of change are you,

and the peace of tranquil waters.

You are all these things Friend God,

and I thank you. Amen. Amen.

May I journey without fear
through all your seasons.
In emptiness let me find fullness.
In imprisonment let me find freedom.
Render me passive in your will
and I shall be most active,
moving with you in everything, seeing you in everything
knowing you in everything. Amen.
– Joy Cowley, Aotearoa Psalms

Hymn: As with gladness men of old (traditional)

Poem: 'Wise men came journeying', by Shirley Murray (from Alleluia Aotearoa)

Carol: We three kings (traditional)

Matthew 2, for two readers

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking,

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him,

“In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

“Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³ After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,

“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,

“Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

²⁰ *“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”*

²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled,

“He will be called a Nazorean.”