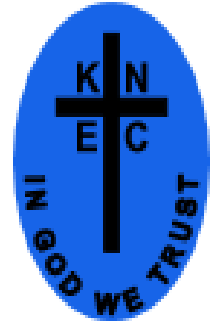




# Kirkcaldy and East Fife Parish Church of Scotland

Scottish Charity No. SC006973

[www.knec4jesus.org.uk](http://www.knec4jesus.org.uk)



**Reading** Matthew 2 : 1-12

**Sermon: 10 January 2010**

*2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi<sup>a</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east<sup>b</sup> and have come to worship him."*

Today when we hear the word "star" we all have different understandings of the word...

If you had too much to drink over the festive seasons you might have seen "stars" especially the morning after,

Lovers would surely confess all they saw in each others eyes were "stars"

Younger people would immediately think of the real "stars" the heroes of a film or the characters in a tally soapy;

In Africa people would immediately think of the "stars" in the sky because they are the "signposts" for when you are lost in the field...It happened to me one night. I was in my first charge in the Karoo or semi desert area when I got lost after I visited people on a far off farm. I did not have a SATNAV then, and could not remember which of the dirt roads I had to take to get back home in Cradock, the town where I stayed. But I remembered the words of a teacher who told us to look up at the skies when we are lost. He told us to look for the Southern Cross constellation of stars in order to determine where north, south, east and west are. Although it was quite risky, I climbed out of my car, looked up at the sky and found the Southern Cross constellation of stars. Then I knew which direction I had to take. I don't know what you would do in Scotland especially when there is freezing fog.

The same is true of our reading in the Bible. The wise men were also lost. In their case they lost sight of the bright star!

The wise men or *Magi* were astrologers, who played a prominent part in court life in many eastern states, as advisers to kings. Their insights were derived from sophisticated astronomical observation combined with the sort of 'interpretation' which present-day horoscopes provide. By such calculations made in *the east* (probably Mesopotamia, modern Iraq) they had concluded that an important royal birth had taken place in Israel, which called for a "state visit". It is only later that we read that the "star" moved. They saw the star hanging over Israel. They went to Herod because he was the rightful king. It was only logical that he would know of the royal birth. Herod was taken aback. He was the rightful king of the Jews.

Now these strange people come and tell **him**, who is the king, that the king of the Jews is born somewhere. Off course he was upset to say the least. He also knew that to his disadvantage

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<sup>a</sup> Traditionally *Wise Men*

<sup>b</sup> Or *star when it rose*

was the fact that he was only a half Jew from Edom which was a real thorn in his flesh. In the Old Testament, Edom was a mountainous area of southern Palestine, which stretched from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba. Its people were enemies of the Israelites. The Jews did not consider Herod as their rightful king. They were forced by the Roman authorities to accept him as their king. Herod was a puppet in the hands of Rome. He was known as a great builder of public works and a shrewd diplomat in his dealings with both Romans and Jews, but he laid oppressive taxes on and conscripted labour from the Israelites. As he grew older, he became increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous sons, wives, and others close to him put to death because he feared plots to overthrow him.

No wonder Matthew is telling us that Herod and the whole Jerusalem were troubled and terrified by this terrible news. Herod would not take it. The Jews in Jerusalem knew trouble was on the way. They knew his cruelties and murderous killings. He immediately summons his advisors to tell him if there is any indication somewhere of the birth of the Messiah. His advisors were the "chief priests" who headed the twenty-four main orders of priests who lived in and around the city and the scribes or the "teachers of the law". They had inherited the ancient profession of copying Scripture, but they had evolved into a class of teachers well trained in interpreting and applying the Old Testament as well.

It seems that Herod knew about the expectations of a coming Messiah. They quote Micah chapter 5 that said it would all happen in Bethlehem, 5 miles south from Jerusalem.

Then his slyness comes to the fore when he meets up again with the wise men in secret telling them to go and find out exactly where the Messiah is so that he also can go and pay his respects.

As the wise men approached Bethlehem they saw the star leading them onwards to the stall where Jesus was born. When they realized this as a divine guidance they were filled with *exceedingly great joy* (v. 10). They found the mother and child and knelt as a sign of respect before him in worship. Their gifts were exactly the ones that were used in those days to honour a new king.

All three gifts honour Jesus as King. Gold, then as now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. Similar visits of Magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time.

And then the surprising turning point in this story: God reveals himself to these pagans in a dream warning them not to go to Herod which they obeyed!

The meaning of Matthew is clear: God welcomes the Gentile believers into his Kingdom. The light has come to everyone that believes in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The wise men were literally lost but God guided them to salvation. He helped them to escape from the cruelties of Herod.

There are many similarities between us and the wise men. Like them we also struggle at times to find the bright star of God's peace, hope and love in our lives. Every one of us has experienced loss, despair, sickness, hopelessness. All of us have experienced the feeling being lost somewhere with no-one helping. Yes we all are actually busy travelling to the New Jerusalem that God has promised to us in the birth of Jesus. The route to the New Jerusalem started for us all a long time ago in Bethlehem.

Some of us have arrived in Bethlehem like the wise men but unlike them decided not to continue with the journey in faith. Many have returned to the earthly Jerusalem where it is

comforting to do whatever you please. Many worship the worldly values of selfish brotherhood, shallow love and materialistic pleasures. It is evident in the world we all live in today. It comes to the fore in our movies, television programs and the ways in which people talk to each other. Others still find themselves in the earthly Jerusalem with Herod, in a place where the world reigns supreme and not God. Many find them in a place of lies and deception.

- But we as believers have found Jesus like the wise men. We have to continue with the journey in a different and new direction. We also know that this path is not always easy. We know we have a responsibility. We must worship God with the best that we have - The best of our time, and effort despite the credit crunch, and other things that often hinder us to live with God in a relationship. We must work hard in this coming year to serve God with everything we have. We must also work hard convincing others with our lives of faith that we have found Jesus. Everyone around us must be able to see that:
- we are different in the way we talk,
- we are different in the way we walk,
- we are different in the way we criticize,
- we are different in the way we judge,
- we are different in the way we love and hope,
- we are different in the way we treat our husbands, or partners, parents and children,
- we are different in the way we help others
- we are different in the way we cry
- we are different in the way we handle sickness and despair...

Have you been lost in your life before? Have you also experienced that you have lost the Bright star of God's love and guidance?

Do not despair. The story of the wise men gives us all hope. They were lost but miraculously God lead them through the star straight to Bethlehem. Once they were committed to find Jesus, God helped them. Maybe if we commit ourselves more and more to find time to nurture and work on our relationship with God, we will also find the TRUTH The WAY and THE LIFE in Jesus Christ. May we then have the gold – the best of our time, the myrrh – a life that is full of the love for God and the Frankincense – life in devotion to God to offer.

On which journey are you on this second Sunday of the year 2010?

**Amen**

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## Readings for the week

Matthew 2: 1-12

Before Christmas we read Micah's prophecy of the restoration of Israel's kingship (5.2-5a). Micah was very critical of the oppression of the poor in the capital cities, the northern Samaria and the southern Jerusalem. His vision was that an ideal shepherd-king of Israel would come from an undistinguished little town in Judah. He would come from Bethlehem, where the shepherd-boy David had been anointed as the future king and had received the spirit of the Lord. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus comes to fulfil the law and the prophets (5.17), and the narrative introduces many direct quotations from Scripture. Micah's prophecy enables Jesus, born in rural Bethlehem, to be recognized as the true king, Herod, in his capital of Jerusalem, is only another tyrant seeking his own advantage. In the story even the chief priests and scribes seem to acknowledge this. Another prophecy of an ideal ruler of Israel described him as a star that will come from Jacob (Numbers 24.17). The star that stops where the child is born is both the Jewish Scriptures' testimony to Jesus and a sign recognised by the wisest of the Gentiles. Elsewhere in Matthew we hear of one foreigner who came to Israel from Sheba. The Queen came 'from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon' (12.42). Grammatically the masculine plural magi (astrologers) can be inclusive of male and female. There is no reason to exclude wise women from Matthew's story of those who came to worship the one 'greater than Solomon'.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, now we are starting on the next bit of the journey.

Help us to shine like polished gold for you wherever we go.

Help us to be the fragrance of the Spirit wherever we are,  
and make us unselfish with all that we meet.

We want the baby Jesus in us to grow and to mature,  
for your sake, for our sake, and for the sake of everyone we meet.

**Amen.**