

Visitors and More Dreams

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 December 2021

Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] Now, we're just going to go back for a little while to the reading that we shared together from Matthew's Gospel. And you'll remember this is a short series titled Born, and it's looking at the birth of Jesus from the point of view of Joseph, really, because the Matthew account really deals with Joseph's side of things, and the Luke account deals with Mary's side of things, and looks at it from their point of view.

So we're looking at the story today, the visit of the wise men, and looking at it really from Joseph's point of view. It's a very well-known story. You know it well.

It's one we rehearse and repeat a lot, particularly at this time of year. But I would encourage you today to look at it afresh with the eye of faith. And that's always an important thing to do when we look at a well-worn story from Scripture, and we don't just kind of switch off or think, well, there's nothing really to learn from this that we can see what is there and also see what is not there.

And that can be significant and important for us. And that's what I hope to spend a little bit of time looking at from the passage today. Now we know that the birth of a child does change everything in the life of a family.

A family is quite often turned upside down by the birth of a child. And however many books parents read in preparation for the birth maybe of their first child, it's never quite what you imagine it to be, is it?

[1 : 37] There's all kinds of different experiences that come through the birth of a child. There's wild times, there's joyous times, and it can also be tough.

It can be difficult, and there can be tough times even at these early stages. And for many families it can become all-consuming. And we know that, don't we?

And I know that from my own experience that it's like this or maybe sometimes other experiences as well. It's as if that no one has ever gone through what I'm going through at this time.

It's unique, it's just unbelievable. And you know, we see that in families in the church, don't we? We see when young mums and dads come to church and they've got bags under their eyes and they're shevelled hair and there's exhaustion and they haven't slept for 73 days or something.

And you can see that whole mixture of emotions and highs and lows that come from the birth of a child.

[2 : 41] No one has ever experienced that. But actually, that was true for Joseph and Mary. No one had actually experienced what they were going through.

No one in the history of the world had ever experienced what they had experienced. There had never been a birth like the birth of Jesus. And it's a birth that did literally not just turn their world upside down, it turned the world upside down.

And that's really all I want to talk about today is this passage in the light of that truth. And I'm not really going to spend any time applying the truth except to encourage you to meditate on what we're going to go through today and ask yourself why it's so important and why it inspires worship.

And I hope that's what it does today, that you are already unprepared to be inspired, not by me, but by the Word of God and by the truth of God's Word to worship Him as we come together.

And what we're reminded of in this story, as we've looked at last week and this week, and as you know, as heaven is shockingly involved in this story. And that immediately takes us out of our comfort zone.

[4 : 04] And it reminds us that when we read this account, we are confronted, indeed when we read anything in the Bible, obviously, we are confronted with another world.

It's a world that God says we can only see by faith. It's a spiritual world. It's a world that we can't see with our eyes, but it's as real as it is unseen.

And it's one of the reasons we come together to worship, to remind us and remind ourselves of that, that the material world is not all that there is, and it's easy for us to fall back into that thinking, that our day-to-day living, our health, or our illness, or our circumstances, or our lives that we physically feel and touch and know are all that there is.

But as Christians, without any hint of embarrassment, as we know God in Christ, it's vital that we remember that and live in the light of that truth, that there is another unseen world that we live in and that lives around us.

That perspective is crucial and important. So we will always, when we get the opportunity, and we must get the opportunity, surely at this time of the year at some point, to repudiate all talk of myth or fable when we're confronted with the story of the birth of Jesus, because lots of people will just throw it out as being insignificant or myth or fable.

[5 : 40] And we have then a responsibility not to stay quiet, but to say, no, I don't believe it's myth or fable. I believe in the God who created the universe by the word of His mouth, was well-abled and did and had a reason for doing what He did and entering into our world.

So heaven was shockingly involved in this story. The terrifying angel of the Lord who comes in the dreams, don't we? Making an announcement, passing on truth that those to whom the message went would never have understood or believed had it not come from an angel of the Lord.

Whether it was the conception when He spoke to Zechariah, when He spoke to Mary, when He spoke to Joseph, when He spoke to the shepherds, followed by an army of singing angels.

Heaven intervened and heaven broke into our experience. And of course, beyond that, God Himself, and the person of His Son, becomes flesh, becomes a human being.

It's the coming of heaven's king into our world. Heavenly involved, heaven is. And do you want to understand heaven today?

[6 : 58] Do I want to understand the spiritual world more? Well, we see it when we see Jesus. And when we understand Jesus, Jesus is the king of heaven. And so we understand more of that spiritual world when we come to know and understand Jesus.

But also the heavenly realms are involved in this story, aren't they? In verse 2, it talks about the star that the wise men were following from the east. So it's the aligning of the appearance of the star as a significant pointer towards the coming of the king of kings.

The heavenly realm and heaven itself is involved in this account. Now, we have the Scripture, we have God's Word, we have the Word made flesh in Jesus and is spoken of in the completed Scriptures.

And we have that to guide us. But can I just say today, don't limit or underestimate the God of the Word, which we can sometimes do.

We can, we want sometimes just to keep them within the front and the back of this book because we can close the book and we can keep that book at a distance from our lives and we can make it simply a book and we can forget what it speaks of.

[8 : 21] Now we know and we defend to the end the reality that He will primarily speak to us through His Word. And when He does speak to us, beyond that, it will never contradict what He's revealed in His Word to us.

But we may sometimes, I think, in our lives and in our spirituality and be in danger of forgetting who God is, of naturalizing, as it were, our faith, intellectualizing our faith and forgetting the supernatural, forgetting that God, even in His Word, is breaking in from heaven into our lives.

That it's not just a philosophy. It's not just a way of living. It's not just a moral choice that we make. It is that we come into contact with the living God through His Word and through His person, Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit.

So when the Spirit of God convicts you in your heart and your conscience, sometimes in your dreams and through the discernment, the gift of discernment and wisdom, be sensitive to that.

Do you have a living faith with God through His Word, or is it all just a little bit academic, a little bit philosophical, a little bit moralistic?

[9 : 42] It's easy for it to be these things. But even as we look at His Word, we take it and we ask that He will make it alive because it's a living Word and it's heaven breaking in.

So we find that heaven shockingly involved and then we see Joseph's experience here in Matthew. No mention is made of a census, a journey to Bethlehem, nothing about an inn or the manger or the shepherds or the visit to the temple.

None of that in this account. We're not going to look at that. This account is different. Look, I do believe there is an unwritten assumption at least that when they did come to fulfill the requirements of the census that they relocated to Bethlehem.

That would seem to be at least implied in the text that they didn't return, they didn't go away and that they had a home there.

And there's maybe a bit more of a time gap in this story than we in this story. It's probably very unlikely, extremely unlikely. I would say important, no, I wouldn't say, but very unlikely that the wise men came to the manger.

[11:04] There does seem to be a time gap that's assumed here that I'll explain a little bit about. So Joseph and Mary had Jesus and they'd relocated and maybe things did settle for a while.

Maybe things did become quite ordinary. At least for a few weeks or months, possibly. And you wonder if Joseph held Jesus in his arms, as Israel will hold daily in his arms.

And just looked at him and said, who is this child? What will he become? Was it all a dream? Maybe as things just got back to a bit more normality, as normal as it can for new parents.

And in the kind of rather bizarre situation that they found themselves in having a child, but not sleeping together and not being in the same bedroom.

Strange days, but what did he think? What would come next? And then, well, what did come next? The visit of these wise men.

[12:07] Now, Magi, they're called in some of the other translations as well. And I know, you know, there's always someone who's ready to say, well, there wasn't three of them.

We don't know how many there were. Tradition tells us there's three of them, possibly because there was three gifts. But we're just told that wise men came. And as I said, very probably not to the manger, but came to Bethlehem to a home, possibly some months later.

And, you know, we see a little bit of that from verse 16 where Herod, we didn't actually read this, but when Herod realized that they hadn't gone back to visit him, he sent and killed all the male children in the region according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

And that was up to two years. So there was obviously some length of time happening here. So they were diviners, possibly astronomers, magicians, court advisors.

Most probably they came from Babylonia to the east, pagan, gentile country. But they could well have learned about Old Testament Scriptures from the time of Daniel.

[13:27] Because in Daniel chapter 5 and verse 11, we have these words, that as a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the Holy God, remember Daniel at this time? They were the people of Israel were captive in Babylon.

They had been thrown out of the promised land. And Daniel, we know, became very significant. In the time of your father, he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods.

Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him what? Chief of the magicians and chanters, astrologers and diviners, the Magi, the wise men.

And so from that time, there would have been, as was the case in these days, the study of all the ancient texts, and they would have been interpreting them. They would have even been watching the astrological signs in creation which God used potentially miraculously at this time with the star. And they would have been, as courtiers, people who would have come to visit kings that were born in other nations. It was important, it was significant.

[14:30] They would have enjoyed and spoken of and predicted royal births and royal kings. But you know, maybe we forget here, it wasn't just these guys that came and visited as in tradition, a manger in the middle of nowhere.

I think the whole of Jerusalem knew about this. Even the king knew about it, King Herod. This was big news. They may well have come with an entourage. They may well have been a big group of them.

It was a big deal for these people to travel from the east to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, so much so that everyone in the city of Jerusalem was troubled by what they saw.

It was something that was disturbing both to Herod and to the people. The whole idea of foreign dignitaries coming to visit the birth of a king.

King Herod could have none of that. He didn't want someone to challenge him and his authority. Herod was a paranoid and brutal dictator.

[15 : 37] He's known to have recorded, murdered many of his own family in order to secure his own position. And he was afraid about this new king.

And these magi, these wise men were told and are reminded in the story that you know so well, brought gifts to this king. Gifts that came from a foreign land, possibly pagans, possibly not.

But they came from the land of Israel's enemies, but they come with insight and they do come to worship and they come with gifts. Gold would have been the gift of the kings.

Frankincense, the essential oil made from a resin from trees used in offering, used in worship and myrrh, an embalming spice used for the bodies of those who have died.

Symbolic gifts, gifts symbolizing maybe what they knew themselves at this point. But what did Joseph make of all the attention?

[16 : 50] You know, when he said things, things that maybe settled down. He was just a bit of a dream and all of a sudden, the whole of the sea, are interested in the birth of his son and what that meant.

And all of a sudden he's the center of attention again. And of course then from that we have the terror of the message that he receives in his another dream in verse 13, rise, take the child and his mother flee to Egypt.

It's not a holiday. And remain there until I tell you for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. They're newborn, the unique one born, the son of God to destroy him.

Their lives again were turned upside down. Reality kicks in again. God was to be feared. He was known as a killer.

And they are plunged again into the unknown and into great danger and to traveling to a foreign country. Maybe they use, we don't know what happened to the gifts.

[18 : 04] Maybe they sold them and used the money to finance their stay in Egypt. But it must have been grim. Must have been grim.

As they heard in their ears the cry of the innocents as they travel out of Jerusalem.

But through it we do see the mind of God unfolding, don't we? And with this I finish, we see the mind of God unfolding. Matthew himself, as he recounts this story, as he records it, he records it and fills it with Scripture from the Old Testament, prophetic Scripture.

Micah chapter 5 which speaks about the child of God being born in Bethlehem and nations coming to worship the King. Hosea 11 speaking about out of Egypt I have called my son, which is where Jesus would have come from back to Nazareth.

And then Jeremiah 31, that desperate, desperate prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children but cannot be comforted. I've spoken about this before here, I know.

[19 : 16] It was quoted, I let death of the innocent sit dumb-blane by the reverent Ian Paisley in Parliament.

Never forget that. I'll never forget that moment driving in the car, hearing him speak to the Parliament of the Nation quoting this passage about Rachel weeping for her children.

And the reality of that has never left me thinking of what happened in Jerusalem and what happened to Joseph and Mary.

The star also, although not spoken of in this passage, Numbers 24, I see him but not now, I behold him but not nearer. A star will come out of Jacob, a sceptile will rise out of Israel.

Or even the gifts, an amazing passage in Isaiah 60 which could just be a commentary on Matthew chapter 1. A rise shine for your light is coming, the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

[20 : 16] See darkness covers the earth, thick darkness is over the peoples. But the Lord rises upon you and as glory appears over you, nations will come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Then you will look and be radiant, your hearts will throb and swell with joy. The wealth of the seas will be brought to you, the riches of the nations will come, herds of camels will cover the land, young camels of Midiannay and from all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense.

All of Scripture pointing towards God's purposes from the very beginning, God's purposes remind us that this is what is at the core of who He is, it's the value of the Old Testament to appreciate that right from the beginning there has been this purpose of God to redeem His people.

And we see that spiritual battle, that unseen reality right through, if you look at the Old Testament with spiritual perspective, you see all through the Old Testament, Satan's desire to destroy the seed of the woman, to destroy the possibility of Jesus, the genealogical movement of Jesus as the

promised seed.

And we see that unseen spiritual battle all the time through the people of Israel and what happens to them. Yet God's promises, God's commitment, God's determination, God's love overcomes it all on our behalf.

[21 : 48] He uses creation, He uses the nations, He uses the heavenly realms, He uses angels to announce that Jesus Christ is here for you and for me today.

And we need to be living in the light of that spiritual realm, especially just now. And there's so many things to discourage and deepen our struggle and battle in the world.

God's rescue, God's plan is the only plan there is, and this chapter really speaks into that for you and for people. There isn't a plan B in God's purposes for us.

So in the turmoil and in the confusion of your life today, in whom do you trust? As Joseph and Mary are an example, the explanation of your condition and mine before a holy God, sinners condemned under His wrath justly but provided with a Savior if we will believe and put our trust in Him.

Is that what you hope for? The joy and gifts you have today as you've come to church, to whom do you give thanks? In your failure and my failure and guilt, where do we turn for forgiveness?

[23 : 08] In our weakness, who are we looking to for strength? In our anxiety about the future, where does our hope lie? Because this account is not the myth of Christmas to accompany the mince pies.

It is not mince pies and myth that we celebrate at this time of year. It's the living God with His saving purposes for this lost universe of which we're apart.

Go to Him like the wise men and worship. Don't be like Herod who wants him dead.

None of us would say that. But sometimes by our actions, we keep Him out of our lives and our hearts and we try and live in our own strength and courage.

So may we learn and grow and be excited by this story all over again as we hear it through God and by God's grace.

[24 : 09] Amen. Lord God, help us, we pray, to take Your Word, to apply it to our hearts. We thank You for it.

We pray Your blessing on it. And we ask that today through the baptism, we will remind ourselves again of what Jesus has come to do.

And tonight at the Carol service, we will seek Your protection, seek Your grace, seek Your presence, and that You will bring many tonight who don't know Jesus but who will hear the Word, respond to it and come to know Jesus for themselves and repent and believe.

That is our longing and that is our desire. Amen.