

The Journey

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Andrew M.T. Dibb

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Matthew 2:1-2

Most of us are familiar with the Christmas carol, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, even though we may get mixed up towards the end as we try to keep the gifts in order. We might even remember the actions that go with the gifts. But how many of us know why there are twelve days? Traditionally Christmas was celebrated from Christmas Day and ending twelve days later on January 6th, known as “the Feast of the Epiphany.” This feast day commemorates the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem, whose journey from the east was completed as they fell before the Lord to present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. “Epiphany” means a “manifestation,” or presentation of the Lord. Because the Wise Men were not Jews, the feast commemorates the spread of the news of the Lord’s birth to the gentiles.

The lesson this morning recounted how the wise men saw the Star in the east and followed it, first to Jerusalem, then, on the advice of King Herod, to Bethlehem, until it stood over the house where the young child and His mother were. When they saw Him, they fell down and worshipped Him and presented their gifts. The goal of their journey we completed in the presence of the Lord.

All journeys have a goal, a destination. Getting up in the morning and driving to work is a journey that is fulfilled or completed when we arrive at our jobs. This is true of every journey, long or short, important or mundane. This was no less true of the Wise Men as it is for each of us. What was their goal as they set out to follow the star to Bethlehem?

The Gospel gives some answers to this question. When the Wise Men came to Jerusalem, they asked Herod where the King of the Jews was to be born. Their object was not to see Herod, but the Lord, and they did not want to just to see Him, they wanted to worship Him. It is no surprise then, that when they continued their journey to Bethlehem, and entered the house where He was, they fulfilled this desire and fell down and worshipped Him. The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were expressions of their worship; the overriding goal of their entire journey was to worship the Lord.

What does it mean to “worship” the Lord? What does it mean to fall down and worship as the Wise Men did? When we read the Word, it often says that someone worshipped, but not how they did so. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, aside from the story of the Wise Men, we are told of how the Lord was tempted in the wilderness the devil tempted the Lord by offering Him all the kingdoms of the earth “if you will fall down and worship me.” What was the devil expecting the Lord’s worship to look like? Later, in the same Gospel we read of a leper who

wanted to be cleansed, falling down before Him and “worshipped Him.” Here we can interpret the leper’s prostration as worship. In another story, after the Lord calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, His disciples worshipped Him, and they did so again after the resurrection when He appeared to them. In none of these cases does the Gospel describe what their worship looked like, only that they worshipped Him. The question we will explore this morning is: what does worship look like, what does it mean to worship the Lord?

Not only is the word “worship” used in the Word as a way of interacting with the Lord, but we use it as well, for example, we call going to church “worship,” and at time loosely in conversation when we say that someone “worships the ground another person walks on.”

“Worship” is the kind of word that gets used a lot, but it needs a bit of exploration if we are to get the full meaning of it. A simple dictionary definition means to “reverence or show honor to someone.” It doesn’t help us much; how do we reverence or show honor to the Lord?

One way to answer this is to follow the Wise Men on their journey. Since their goal was to worship the Lord, we can think of their entire journey as an act of worship. It is also a blueprint of our own spiritual journeys as we set out to worship the Lord.

They started in the east when they saw the Lord’s star and began to follow it. The very act of following the star was an act of worship, even though they were a long way from Bethlehem. That star was different from the millions of others spread out across the night sky, as it held the promise of what they were looking for, a way to worship the Lord.

The Heavenly Doctrine tell us that the Wise Men were people a knowledge of spiritual things. They knew the Lord would be born and were watching for His sign, and when they saw it, they knew where it would lead them. The sight of the star was the beginning of the journey that would lead them to fall down before the Lord and worship Him.

The Wise Men would have seen the star amongst all the other stars in the heavens. It was a sign of promise, a way leading to the worship of the Lord. Stars in general represent the many things we know that guide us through life. Most of them are the ordinary and everyday things that make it possible for us to function. We know a lot of things, so our minds can be compared to a clear night sky with thousands of stars shining in it.

Amongst all these things is a dominant star, one representing the special truths that give purpose and meaning to our lives. These hold within themselves the promise that if we follow them, our lives will be lifted up, enriched and fulfilled. These are the truths of the Word, and they are, as the Psalmist said, “a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path,” for they guide our journey to the Lord, who makes us wiser and happier the closer we get to Him.

The first step of the Wise Men’s journey was deciding to follow that star. When they saw it, they knew the Lord had been born, but the decision to follow it was theirs. Knowing truth is not the same as having faith in it, nor is it worshipping the Lord. It is entirely possible for us to know

many truths, and yet remain untouched by them. There is no better example of this than Herod. When the Wise Men came to him in Jerusalem, they explained that they had seen the star in the east, followed it, and were now looking for the Lord.

Herod's actions of knowing truths, but not following them can be seen in his actions. When Herod heard the Wise Men from the East, he called his own wise men, to ask where the Lord was born. Essentially, he had the same knowledge as the Wise Men from the east, but with one significant difference. The Wise Men sought the Lord to worship Him, Herod sought Him to kill Him. What causes the truths to shine in our minds and lead us to the Lord, is not the knowledge of truth itself, but the way we hold that truth. Truth doesn't shine in our minds because we know it, just as it didn't shine in Herod's mind. What makes it shine is how we hold it, and that is what lead us to worship.

Sometimes it seems as if worship begins with truth from the Word, and rest assured, we cannot worship without truths to guide us. But truth by itself no more generates worship with us than it did with Herod. Herod's missing ingredient was humility. He was concerned with his own position and power, and the truths of the Lord's birth threatened this, leading him to one of the most atrocious acts in history.

The distinction with the Wise Men is their intention to worship the Lord. They put the Lord first, themselves second in an act of humility. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that "all worship must contain humility, and if separated from it no adoration and so no worship at all is present" (AC 2327:2).

Humility is the recognition that of ourselves we are nothing and that the Lord is everything, His truths guide our minds when we set them over the things we hold to be true, over things that interest us, over our favorite hobby horses. When we do this, truths from the Word reorder our minds, change our perspectives, goals and actions, bringing them into harmony with the Lord.

But this does not happen in a moment. The Wise Men's journey was long as they followed the star. Along the way they faced perils epitomized by Herod. But nevertheless, they continued. In the Word, "to journey" means to progress along a pathway, and the pathway to worship is to cultivate new truths from the Word, to humble ourselves them, and put them into practice.

We see some of the things the Lord faced on His journey years after the Wise Men's visit. He was challenged by the devil to worship him instead of God. Even the Lord had to weigh up what might have seemed like becoming all powerful in a worldly sense, and losing everything important to Him, or humbling Himself before God. He overcame the devil's temptation through His humility to God and rejecting the prideful place the devil offered.

True humility is not a mental recognition that the Lord is all, and we are comparatively nothing. Unfocused humility can be a paralyzing state of mind leading us to do nothing because we are so unworthy. Truth and humility exist in our minds, and as important as they are, they need to come together in an outward expression that contains both of them.

This brings us to the next attribute of worship: service to others that stems from the combination of truths we have learned and the humility to see them as necessary. The Word teaches us to love others, to hold our tendencies back and to put ourselves out for the sake of others. But these teachings are only completed in our actions. As we act from truth, because it is true, we come to acknowledge and worship the Lord on all planes of life, our understanding, our actions and our will. Our whole lives become an expression of worship before the Lord.

We hear no more of the star when the Wise Men entered the house where the Lord was. It had done its work, leading to Bethlehem and the Lord Himself. Truths exist as a means to an end, it has a purpose, which is fulfilled when we enter into true worship of the Lord. We would never be able to do this without the truth to guide us, without it protecting us from Herod's states. The Word teaches us humbling facts about ourselves so we can prostrate ourselves before the Lord. It shows the evils we must shun as barriers that cause strife with our neighbors and inspires us to be useful to others on every plane of life. When the Wise Men entered the house, they worshipped the Lord. Their worship was the sum total of all these things.

Now we can ask again what their worship looked like. True worship of the Lord is being willing to accept the truths of His Word – the star in the East – and conform our lives to them living in a state of humility before Him – the journey to Bethlehem. True humility rests in being willing to arrange our minds so that what the Lord teaches takes precedence over all we know. Then, from that new perspective, worship is expressed in our actions, in the way we love all the people who impact our lives, how we serve our jobs, community and country, until our whole lives become expressions of worship.

When the Wise Men returned to their own country if they were anything like the shepherds who had come before them, they would have “returned, [glorifying](#) and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.” The fulfillment of their goal of worshipping the Lord would have remained with them for the rest of their lives.

So it is with us, each of us is on a journey. Truths from the Word give an epiphany, a sight of the Lord that is the beginning. When we come to the realization that we need to set everything aside, as the Wise Men did, and follow the truths in humility, so that our lives become one of service to others, then we come into true worship. Our journey is not something we do once. Each truth leads us to the Lord, each epiphany strengthens every other, and every act of service builds in us the habit of worship, not once, but always.

AMEN

Lessons

Matthew 2:1-12, AC 5223, AC 3762, AC 5605:3

Matthew 2

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

⁶ And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

AC 5223 [2] The magi in those times had a knowledge of the kinds of things that belong to the spiritual world, and in their teaching about these they employed the correspondences and the representatives known to the Church. [...] [4] The fact that the term 'magi' was applied to those

who had a knowledge of spiritual realities, and who also for that reason received revelations, is clear from the magi who came from the east to Jerusalem, asking where the King of the Jews was to be born and saying that they had seen His star in the east and had come to worship Him, Matt. 2:1, 2.

AC 3762[2] Truths concerning charity towards the neighbour and concerning love to the Lord, must first be learned before a person can be regenerated, and must also be acknowledged and believed. And insofar as those truths are acknowledged and believed, and are endowed with life, that person is also regenerated and those truths are implanted in his natural, where they exist as in their own soil. They are first implanted there through the instruction received from parents and teachers, then from the Word of the Lord, and after that from personal reflection on them. But all of this does no more than to deposit those truths in the person's natural memory and so to place them among the cognitions there. They are still not acknowledged, believed, and received unless life is led in accordance with them, in which case the person enters into an affection for them; and insofar as he enters into an affection for them because his life accords with them, those truths are implanted in his natural as their own soil. Things that are not so implanted do indeed remain with that person, but only in his memory as some item of knowledge or historical fact which does no more than enable him to talk about such things, to further his reputation by means of them, and in so doing to grow in wealth and position. When this is the case truths have not been implanted within him.