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Here we are at the beginning of another new year! I was reflecting on "**new beginnings**" and shared some of my thoughts in January's issue of the Grapevine.

New beginnings are God-given opportunities to wipe the slate clean and start over, to gratefully forget the past, shape the present and look forward to the future.

Today is Epiphany, **supposedly** the day on which, **allegedly** three "wise men" visited Jesus; their visit is not *alleged*, but details about them, is questionable.

Once again, in our attempt to make the Christmas narrative believable, we embellish the story with *add-ons* which I think both distracts and detracts from what God wants us to understand, what happened.

The only account we have of the people known as the "wise men" is in the first Gospel, that written by Matthew.

Matthew is writing to the Jewish people, a people proud of their heritage, so he starts with Jesus' genealogy, back to Abraham, whom the Jews consider the Father of their nation. Matthew then frames Jesus in the context of God's fulfilled promise, *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means, "God with us"*<sup>1</sup>, is the Angel's message to Joseph.

Mathew starts by presenting God fulfilling history (**past**), then God keeping His promise to Israel as narrated to Joseph (**present**), followed by God fulfilling His promise of blessing the nations of the world<sup>2</sup> by narrating the visit of the Magi (**future**).

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7:14

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3 (*in particular, last phrase in v.3*)

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Let's dispel, as quickly as we can, some of the myths surrounding the *Magi*. First, there is no mention of their number; conjecture is that they each brought one of the gifts mentioned, gold, frankincense and myrrh, therefore three Magi. These are unusual gifts to give to a baby, and well-meaning people have speculated that **Gold** is associated with Kings, and given to Jesus the King of Kings; **Frankincense** is associated with worship and Jesus is to be worship as Deity; and **Myrrh**, a fragrance used in embalming was intended for Jesus' death.

We don't visit a new born baby with three gifts, one for who they are, one for who they will be, and one in anticipation of the type of death they will die?! So, there's no need to speculate, these wisdom-filled men did that.

There is also no mention these were the *only* gifts given by the Magi; there may have been more, but these three are the ones mentioned.

A word of caution: We must always be careful to be faithful to the text, not to draw out more from what is mentioned, and to examine when meaning is implied, endorsed or authenticated.

Finally, to their origin. Suggestions have been made, the **three** represent the fathers of nations, Noah's three sons, Japhet who migrated westward, Shem who migrated east, and Ham who migrated south (Christmas cards usually depict an oriental looking man, a western man and black man from the south!), suggesting all humanity is represented around the cradle.

The best explanation I have found is once again from Kenneth Bailey's most excellent book, "*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*", and I read....<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> page 52 ("According to Matthew 2...") to page 53 (ending with, "... the relationship between Isaiah 60 and the Christmas Story.)

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It ties in well with Matthews' text that the three came from "the east".

It is interesting to note in the birth narrative of Jesus, the shepherds are **informed** of Jesus birth and they **go to meet and worship Him**, both Simeon and Anna **discover Jesus in the Temple and worship Him**, and the astrologers followed **the** star to find Jesus, and on seeing Him, **bowed down and worshipped Him**. All three groups of people find a normal baby, no halo around His head, no sign of impending Kingship, just a normal baby you would find in the maternity unit at the JR or at home, recognised Him to be Deity, and worship Him!

Through Advent and Christmas we have been following the golden thread of **worship** in the lives of those mentioned in the Christmas narratives, and today we bring this series to a close with this spectacular story!

Drawing on our lesson last Sunday, we believe that every life born on this earth has a calling from God, "all are called...". We also believe, it is up to us to choose if we accept God's calling. If we do choose to accept, God chooses us for His work; for some of us it is a very specific calling (John the Baptist, Mother Teresa), and for many of us, it is a call to serve where we are placed.

Last November in Calcutta, we visited a project called Freeset, which provides employment to women coming out of the sex trade, founded by a couple who heard God's specific call to serve the poor in Calcutta. *"In 1999, Kerry and Annie Hilton left New Zealand with their four children and moved to Kolkata to work and live amongst the poor. Naively, they signed up for an apartment in the middle of the day. It was only when Kerry was taking a walk at night that he discovered they had moved into the largest red light*

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*area in the city. Their new neighbours were thousands of women forced into prostitution by trafficking and poverty.”<sup>4</sup>*

Most people would think, *God, you made a mistake! Surely you don't want me living here! I made a mistake. I am sorry. Take me out of here.* We imagine the worst and in our minds argue the case for it! ***But whom God calls, He enables!*** In twenty years, hundreds of women have found freedom through Freeset, because Kerry and Annie trusted God's call!

To this couple, the answer was simple, *We came in faith, we live by faith, by faith we shall accept where God has placed us and He will show us what He wants to be done.*

The star-gazers in Jesus' birth narrative are also a very special people. They were a priestly caste of wisdom-filled men from the east of Jerusalem/Bethlehem, perhaps Persia or Babylon, we are not told. They were known for their learning and for their wisdom. They were interested in astronomy, observing the movements of stars and planets, carefully noting everything they saw. Anything out of the ordinary, they understood as an omen. Now they had seen a star that could not be identified.

They might have had access to the holy books of Israel, since Babylon remained a centre of Jewish studies (after two exiles of the Jews); they might have come across the prophecy of Balaam, an early prophet from the east who had predicted very clearly, a star would march forth in Israel<sup>5</sup>. Seeing the new star, they would have investigated further and learned that Israel was the place and the One who was to be born would be special, worthy of worship. So, where they went is where God led them. This they believed with all their heart, soul and mind.

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<sup>4</sup> From the FREESSET website: <https://freesetglobal.com/about-us/>

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 24:17

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They set off to find a King, carrying with them gifts worthy of a King, and when they arrived at the borders of Israel, where would they have gone looking for a king, but to the palace? Hence their question to Herod, *Where is the King born to the Jews? Take us to the room in your palace where the King of Jews is born! We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him!*

Two things spooked Herod: *first* the mention of a “King of the Jews” which threatened him; *second*, there seems to be growing evidence that the group of astrologers were a larger group, some of whom stormed into Herod’s palace demanding to see and worship the “King of the Jews”!!

The purpose of our exploration and study is **worship** and this group of wisdom-filled people teach us something very important about worship.

*First*, worship is about discovering God in all His creation. The starting point of this journey of discovery is the Bible. This is **The Book** in which God reveals to us Himself, His plans and His purposes. We discover the complete person of God. He hides nothing from us, but we must choose to pour through these pages and discover Him.

*Second*, when God shows us the way, it may not be a star for us, it might be an opportunity, it might be what someone says or writes, and could well be words from your reading in the Bible. When God says, **This way..** we must go. God did not tell the astronomers where to go, whom they will meet and what they should say. He placed in their minds the knowledge about the star, and placed in their hearts the desire to follow the star.

So, first learn to know God and build your trust in Him; as you learn to trust Him, obey His direction when He shows you the way.

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Next, accept the fact that you will make mistakes in deciphering, making sense of God's will, but God will deliver you, and direct you out from your mistakes. These people of exceptional wisdom, thought the only place to find a king would be in a palace - that's where they went! Then they said the wrong thing to the wrong person; they asked a conceited, self-centred megalomaniac who was afraid of his own shadow, ***Where is the King of the Jews?***

Accept also the fact that satan ***will*** use your mistakes for his own ends. So Herod asks the astrologers, ***When you find him, tell me where He is, so that I too may go and worship Him.***

Imagine this: God has delivered His Son safely to this earth, and satan, the one who wants to usurp God and be God, does not know where Jesus was born!! Think about that!!

Finally, remember this Truth, God's purpose will always be fulfilled. You will discover the Christ-child and worship Him. You will offer Him your gifts and talents, and He will send you on your journey of life, protected from the plans of the one who plots only evil.

Worship is not restrained to a Church, nor is it restricted to any format. We are called to worship God in everything we do, because the purpose of worship is to get to know the person of God, and as we know Him better, to place our trust/faith in Him

**We worship God, because only He is worthy of worship! That's what the wisdom-filled people from the east figured out, "We have come to worship Him!"**

**Finally, we learn to worship God, because this is our practice for what we shall do in eternity with Him. AMEN.**