

**SERMON FOR THE EPIPHANY
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD
JORDAN GREATBATCH 2018**

On the twelfth day of Christmas
my true love sent to me:
12 Drummers Drumming
11 Pipers Piping
10 Lords a Leaping
9 Ladies Dancing
8 Maids a Milking
7 Swans a Swimming
6 Geese a Laying
5 Golden Rings
4 Calling Birds
3 French Hens
2 Turtle Doves
and a Partridge in a Pear Tree

Quite the mouthful. Who remembers this traditional song? In our modern times, there is some confusion about when the 12 days of Christmas are. The 12th day of Christmas actually ended on Friday, the 6th of January, 12 days following Christmas day. And the 6th of January signifies the Feast of Epiphany which

we have transferred to today. The confusion of the 12 days of Christmas are bit like the confusion surrounding the Feast of Epiphany and particularly the wise men that we hear about.

We have become so used to these images that they have become a part of our Christmas celebrations, just like the manger, shepherds and angels. But all this familiarity can pose a problem. We have misrepresented the three wise men and in doing so take for granted the many things that make up our pageants and carols as being historical truth, the answer is in fact, quite the opposite.

For example we assume that there were three wise men because of the three gifts that were given: gold, incense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). However, the Bible does not say there were only three wise men.

There could have been many more. Tradition says that there were three and that their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, but since the Bible does not say, we have no way of knowing whether the tradition is accurate.

It is also common misconception that the wise men visited Jesus at the stable on the night of His birth. In fact, the wise men came days, months, or possibly

even years later. That is why Matthew 2:11 says the wise men visited and worshiped Jesus in a house, not at the stable. We know that the magi were wise men from "the East," most likely Persia, or modern-day Iran.

This means the wise men traveled 800 to 900 miles to see the Christ child. Most likely, the magi knew of the writings of the prophet Daniel, who in time past had been the chief of the court seers in Persia. Daniel 9:24-27 includes a prophecy which gives a timeline for the birth of the Messiah. Also, the magi may have been aware of the prophecy of Balaam (who was from the town of Pethor on the Euphrates River near Persia) in Numbers 24:17. Balaam's prophecy specifically mentions a "star coming out of Jacob."

The wise men were guided to look for the King of the Jews by a miraculous stellar event, the "Star of Bethlehem," which they called "His star" (Matthew 2:2). They consulted with King Herod in Jerusalem concerning the birth of Christ and were directed to Bethlehem (Matthew 2:4-8).

The Three Wise men through this lens in fact hold a lot more relevance for us than the wise men we

usually encounter. We have been celebrating the incarnation of Jesus Christ these past few weeks, and as we come to the end of the Christmas season, we ourselves are drawn more intimately into the Christmas story through the Feast of the Epiphany, and the visit of the wise men that we celebrate today.

The Epiphany, meaning "to reveal" is about the revelation of Jesus the Messiah to the Gentiles, non-Jews. The Wise men therefore represent for us all Gentiles who have come to recognize the Messiah. And in doing so they reveal to us some important truths.

Firstly, they were not people confined by National and racial boundaries. They understood that the Messiah could come from somewhere else, they were humble enough to recognize God was at work outside their nation, their people and their boundaries. And so the same is true for us. We as Christians need to be open to what God may be doing outside the Church, praising that which is good, but also challenging that which is wrong. The wise men reveal to us that balance.

Secondly, they also recognized the cost in following the Messiah. Their gifts for Jesus were costly. Gold,

Frankincense and Myrrh were some of the most prized materials in the Ancient world at that time. They understood that sometimes faith can cost us and they were willing to offer those things in homage to God and his Messiah. And so at times we are called to count the cost, not just financially, but with our time and our service, not just in the church, but in the world, offering our best for God and in turn honouring his messiah.

Thirdly, the wise men came from afar to worship the messiah, offering him gifts and kneeling before him. The wise men reveal to us the importance of worship, and worshipping together. The original existence of the church was for the purpose of worshipping God. Yes, there was community and friendship, and service to the world and each other. But those were only by-products. Worship is to be our primary task, worship that inspires awe and holiness, in the pattern of those wise men, who brought costly gifts and knelt down to worship. And that is why we continue that pattern, with beautiful ornaments, vestments, candles and incense, gifts that inspire us to lift our eyes to heaven in awe at God's Messiah.

And so as we celebrate The Epiphany today, Jesus as the savour of all peoples, Jews and Gentiles we give thanks for the Wise Men's legacy, their willingness to see beyond themselves and recognise God at work, their readiness to count the cost and offer God their best, and finally their example of worship, honouring and praising God through their actions.

And so as we, the community of All Saints Birkenhead head into 2017, follow the example of the wise men, in being a community of welcome, a community of generosity, and a community of worship.