

Christmas Day 2003

[Put on Santa hat]

“Nadolig Llawen ... Joyeux Noel ... God Jul ... Fröhliche Weinartsfest”

Whatever language is our native tongue, we can say “Happy Christmas”, for on Christmas Day we celebrate the birthday of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

It is a wonderful privilege to bring you the message on Christmas Day. A day on which we specially remember the historical fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was born on an unrecorded day in an unrecorded year, in Bethlehem in the Holy Land.

In all sincerity, I say “Happy Birthday, Lord Jesus!”

As we all know, birthdays are often celebrated with a special cake... At ENORMOUS cost and sacrifice, we have gone out and got one... <grin> And if you would like to take a piece of Jesus’ birthday cake home with you after the service is over, please feel free - there is some on the table at the back.

Now, every year we hear the Christmas story - often with well-meaning embellishments. I think we need to exercise discernment about the traditional Christmas - much of it derives from the pagan, imported from Scandinavia and Germany, or else is historically adapted, example Bishop Nicholas of Myra - in what we know now as Turkey, and King Wenceslas of Bohemia - part of the present Czechoslovakia.

And we all realise that these are lovely stories about people going out of their way to help those less fortunate, but they are NOT the Christmas story per se... they are not the scripturally documented conception and birth of the Saviour of Mankind, bless His Holy Name, which is why Christmas as a feast exists. They all happened because of the real true and living Christmas.

[Remove Santa hat]

We celebrate the birth of our Lord at a time when the northern hemisphere of this planet has just by three days passed the Winter Solstice, or the day of the least amount of sunlight of the 365 in the year.

I remember being taught in school in the 1940s that history records Augustine and other early Christian missionaries converted the northern European pagan festivals of Jul and Lucia into the celebration of Jesus' birth, when they converted the inhabitants to believe in Jesus. I have attended Lucia when working in Sweden, and it is quite pagan.

I was reminded by emails to one of the lists to which I'm subscribed that some Christians, as well as many politically correct pagans, loudly condemn the celebration of Christmas.

I believe we could and ought respond to that... "why should we NOT celebrate it on this day?"

I suggest that we SHOULD... even MUST... celebrate His birthday... the date being totally irrelevant because there is neither scriptural nor historical record of what day of what month, and even of which year.

Celebrating Christ's birth together is wonderful - because it gives the opportunity to celebrate HIM with unbelievers all around us - at a time when TOTAL unbelief in the Lord Jesus Christ is regularly suspended for just a few days.

Yes, the time of year is certainly wrong because sheep in Palestine would NOT lamb in the middle of winter... spring is the time for that, some three or four months later.

But we quite rightly celebrate the birth of our King, on WHATEVER DAY we choose to do so. Just like we celebrate His death and resurrection from the grave every time we partake of communion.

There are many aspects of the Christmas story about which we could remind ourselves at this time, but I have chosen to talk briefly about His arrival being heralded -

NOT by the shepherds who were abiding in the fields, watching over their flocks by night, the words beautifully and poetically penned by Luke the physician, and gloriously set to music by Georg Friderik Handel -

But by the other group of visitors appointed by God to welcome His newly-born Son, your and my Saviour...

"THE WISE MEN"

I'm conscious that our sermon last Sunday, and much of the worship leading was about this. Perhaps God wants to get it across to us?

When I worked in engineering consulting in Western Australia in the late 1960s - and in South Australia on into the late 1980s, I was amazed at how frequently team leaders would be imported from Sydney or Melbourne - and we laughingly called them "Wise Men from the East"! Tongue in cheek, Aman, in engineering circles you too are, by definition, a "Wise Man from the East"!

One is tempted to ask "Why is someone from anywhere else ALWAYS a better choice of expert than the local chap?"

Maybe Jesus hit the nail on the head when in response to the sneering local attitude of "What good can possibly come out of Nazareth?", He stated that "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet despised"

Scripture does not say they were kings. The names of Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar (Caspar) don't feature in either the scriptural narrative or in any history from the time.

Their names are to be found in the mysteries of tradition, promoted by the Venerable Bede in 8th Century England, in the same way as the names of the angels - except for Gabriel and Michael - are purely rabbinical tradition.

Most of us would be familiar with this carol...

*"We Three Kings of Orient are,
Bearing gifts we traverse - or travel - afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star".*

Actually there are no fields and fountains east of the river Jordan, and not many west, either, once we leave what geographers and geologists call the Rift Valley.

Nor are there any moors - in fact there is virtually no vegetation - and the only mountains are on each side of the Jordan, forming the boundaries of the northern part of the Rift Valley.

The song, as beautiful as it is, is geographically inaccurate.

It is also inaccurate in another sense. As George mentioned last Sunday, NOWHERE in scripture does it say there were THREE of them.

Yes, they brought three gifts, and tradition has coupled that with three people.

But the gifts would have been carried by pack animals anyway, so even ONE Wise Man could have brought them.

Now, without shattering your beliefs, I would like to suggest that the Christmas TRADITION MAY even have confused WHO the Wise Men were.

“Wise Men” DID come to witness of the arrival of the child Jesus - and His identity. And wise men still come to Him, as an adult who God resurrected to sit on a throne at His right hand side.

So what can we do to resolve this issue?

We can only turn to Scripture and read what is ACTUALLY WRITTEN about the event, leaving out the bits added later.

Let us read and rejoice in God’s Word on the subject... and looking mostly from the New Revised Standard Version translation...

Mat 2:1-6 tells us that Wise Men came...

“In the time of King Herod...”

(Herod the Great, that is, not the one who tried Jesus 30 years later),

“after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the CHILD who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage’.”

“When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;”

(actually Herod was old and frail, and had less than 4 years left to live, and ‘all Jerusalem’ may well not have been literally everybody, but just the Jewish Sanhedrin, and his magicians and fortune tellers, false prophets if you like)

“and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born”

Why didn't he know this? Because he wasn't a Jew, and didn't know the scriptures. How was this? He was appointed King over the Jews by the Romans.

“They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:...’ ”

and perhaps we might explain the name ‘Ephratah’ associated with Bethlehem in some translations... the Jews accurately recorded all their history and land titles. Ephratah was the name of the man who founded the colony or sub-tribe who lived in that place which we would now call a suburb of Bethlehem. David was descended from Ephratah, and Jesus of course was descended from David.

Geographically, Bethlehem is only 6 kilometres south of Jerusalem, and easily within walking distance. Shall we say about as far away from where we are right now as the “Highlander Hotel” at Holden Hill, or a bit further than the “Settlers’ Arms” to the west or the “Modbury” to the east on Montague Road.

“Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the EXACT TIME when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the CHILD; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage’.”

“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

“On entering the house, they saw the CHILD [NOT BABY] with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

Note that their visit does NOT CLAIM to coincide with Jesus' birth. Verse 1 says *“AFTER Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea”*. Verse 7 says *“search diligently for the CHILD”*.

Reading on a bit, verses 16 to 18...

“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around

Bethlehem who were TWO YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.”

This would make Jesus two or a bit less at the time of this ‘Massacre of the Innocents’ as it is traditionally described. Verse 13 tells us Joseph was to escape with the young child - not called a baby any more, he was a toddler - into Egypt. Aman compared this a few weeks ago with Pharaoh trying to kill Moses and many other children similarly aged.

Please realise, Herod was known to historians for his lack of patience, quickness to anger, and his brutality, as well as being a construction engineer par excellence.

It is VERY UNLIKELY he would have waited two years before realising the Wise Men weren’t coming back.

Probably it was just a matter of a few weeks at the very most - maybe even days. Remember Bethlehem was only as far away as the “Highlander”, after all.

We are told that the Wise Men were led by a star. We read that there was a time when this star quite suddenly appeared, becoming obvious to them. Mat.2:9 & 10

“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.”

Scripture shows Herod and the authorities in Jerusalem were NOT concerned UNTIL they HEARD ABOUT the star from the Wise Men.

So only the wise men were aware of its existence. The king, the priests, soldiers, and the general public were not.

Were this not so, Herod would have had NO NEED to ask THEIR help to find the Christ child.

He could have followed the star himself - or have sent his soldiers - just down the road to Holden Hill, an hour’s march. Remember, ‘Things Spiritual’ are only discerned spiritually. The blinded eyes of the ungodly CANNOT see the truths of the Word.

In Mat 2:9,10 we read that the wise men “*were overwhelmed with joy*” when they identified in which house the child was. They sound much more like

godly men, worshiping the true Lord, rather than Zoroastrian soothsayers and sorcerers.

So is there another answer to who they were? There is a totally different and quite legitimate scenario we can derive from what the scriptures actually say? It won't shatter your faith at all... indeed it may tie together some loose ends.

Firstly it is important that we realise they are witnesses sent by God... that means they were there to observe something of which they would later need to testify.

Remember God says that in His timing, He WILL send witnesses to testify of Christ to the Jews, and in order to be a true witness, they must have been there in person, and have seen with their own eyes.

Some claim the 'wise men' were sorcerers or magicians, because the Greek word 'magos' is used in Mat 2:1. Actually, it is the SAME Greek word that is translated 'sorcerer' in Acts 13:6,8.

Perhaps 'magos' had a different meaning in that generation - we know language is a living thing, and words DO change from generation to generation. This is very evident in today's world.

Cool?

Does that actually mean that it is "cold" No!

Now the sorcerer discussed in Acts was clearly identified as a false prophet, called a 'child of the devil' among other things - so, should we consider him a suitable special witness of Jesus' birth? God's own attitude towards sorcery during the Law period was that anyone with such a wicked spirit was to be put to death by stoning, about which we read in Lev.20:27. And by definition, the era we are discussing is part of the Law Period. It was NOT under "Grace".

So, let us ask ourselves if an UNCHANGEABLE God throughout all the ages could or would violate His Word by leading such individuals to the Christ child? It seems incongruous to me.

Perhaps we should look at what Jesus says about witnesses in Revelation 11, verse 3...

“I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy... The two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth... When they have finished their testimony, the beast... will make war on them... and kill them... and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city ... where also their Lord was crucified”.

They will witness - not to the world, but to God’s original chosen people - that Christ WAS their Messiah, whose visitation they missed 2000 years before through unbelief, and yet to whom Christ has promised to return.

By definition, a witness must have been present at ALL events to which they will give account.

My old favourite, the Oxford English dictionary, says this...

witness, noun, testimony, evidence, confirmation; person giving sworn testimony; person attesting another’s signature to document; person present, spectator; person or thing whose existence &c serves as testimony or proof of; bear witness to or of, attest truth of, as proof of...

So, let us check what other witnesses to Jesus God called, and we find there were three times...

On the Mount of Transfiguration, concerning His ministry, we read in Mat 17:1-3...

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”

There is no difficulty identifying them here for they are named.

The women bringing spices to Jesus’ tomb after his crucifixion found it empty; and we read in Luke 24:1-9 witnessing His death and resurrection...

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the

living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

At Jesus’ ascension, again two men stood by, and witnessed His ascension and foretold second coming, in Acts 1:9-11.

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

Two witnesses, each time; these several visits by these same two men will enable them to give a full and complete witness and testimony of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, to the Jews, but can only be the case if they are the same two witnesses to each and every event. In the Mount of Transfiguration event they are named - as Moses and Elijah.

Does not my exegesis fit both scripture and the known facts FAR BETTER than three sorcerers does? Even though it disagrees with tradition - and as we have discussed before, tradition is often suspect.

So, I leave you with this interesting thought which does not cast any unbelief in who Jesus is, nor His mission.

The Bible is indeed the Word of God and is inerrant - it is without error - as inspired scripture - but only in its original autographs - the original writings - written in the idiom and language of the time.

We need remember that translations - on which we generally base our views - are not necessarily as inspired and without error.

Last Sunday Audrey discussed John 3:16-18 with us... I will add the verses we stopped short of, words set exquisitely to music 100 years ago by Sir John Stainer in his less well-known oratorio called “The Crucifixion”... I am using a modern translation, the NRSV, slightly paraphrased...

“Indeed, God didn’t send His Son into the world to condemn it, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in Him aren’t condemned; but those who don’t believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of

God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people love darkness rather than light because what they do is evil. For all who do evil hate the light and don't come to the light, so that what they do may not be exposed. (John 3:17-20)

I thank God that He sent Jesus to save you and me out of our sins, and that He gave us the tools to share our Lord with all the world. In the words of the translation Georg Friderik Handel used in composing his great oratorio... from the Revelation Jesus gave to John...

“Halleluiah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth! And He shall reign for ever and ever!”

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain! And hath redeemed us to God, by His blood! To receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour and glory and blessing!”

May God bless you and your families today, Christmas Day, the day on which WE CHOOSE to celebrate the UNKNOWN BIRTHDATE of the Lord Jesus Christ, Bless His Holy Name, in whose name I close. Amen