

ISAIAH 60 verses 1 – 6

¹ 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

³ Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ 'Lift up your eyes and look about you: all assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.

⁵ Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.

⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

MATTHEW 2 verses 1 – 12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI (CONTINUED)

Coming as they did from the first century
they had a few problems with London traffic
and were seriously misled by signs
to the Angel and King's Cross.

Inquiring diligently about the star
they were referred to Professor Brian Cox,
who thought it was *amazing*
while smiling in a constant and strangely unsettling way.

In Harrods the camels
made a mess over Soft Furnishings.

On the Underground
commuters glared at *No Smoking* signs
as incense wafted gently through the carriages,

and when the great day came
they saw the entire voting population
slumped on sofas by four o'clock,
rendered senseless by too much
dead poultry and the Queen,

while over Liberty's and Hamley's
the flickering angels sang
Glory to God in the High St

and they found him,
with the inns full up once more,
in the old familiar place,
bringing their unregarded gifts
to the empty stable
of the human heart
where the infant Christ is born
again and again.

Godfrey Rust

“GIFTS OF THE WISE MEN”

READING: *Matthew 2 verses 1 – 12*

INTRODUCTION

It was almost Christmas Day, and the mother of a 3 year old boy was furiously running from store to store trying to get her last minute shopping done. Suddenly she realized that her son's little hand was no longer in hers. Frantically she began to look around and then not finding him nearby, began to quickly retrace her steps. She found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window gazing at the manger scene. She shouted his name and upon hearing his mother's voice, he turned and shouted with innocent glee, "Look Mommy! It's baby Jesus – baby Jesus in the hay." Frustrated because she was pressed for time and because of how scared she had been when he slipped away from her she hastily grabbed his hand and jerked him away saying, "Come on! We don't have time for that!"

Perhaps she didn't really mean to say that. I doubt she intended to tell her child that they were too busy for Jesus but that's pretty much how it sounded. Too often that's actually what happens in people's lives. Not that that's anything new. That sort of thing has been happening for ages. Sometimes it's on purpose, sometimes it's by accident - but people just get too busy for Jesus. I wonder, with the very different way we have all experienced this past Christmas, have people taken time to really think about what Christmas is all about. In the story of "The Grinch who stole Christmas", we are reminded of the nasty old Grinch who tried to ruin the celebrations of the Who's in Whoville by taking all of their presents and decorations preparing to dump them from the peak of Mount Crumpit still heard the singing on Christmas morning instead of the wailing he expected and realised: "He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same! And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?" It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags! And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas..perhaps..means a little bit more!"

As an example, think about our reading about the Wise Men from **Matthew's gospel**. The people of Jerusalem and Bethlehem ignored Jesus. The Chief Priests and the teachers of the law had no time for Him, and King Herod wanted to get rid of Him. The Wise Men may have been late to the party, but at least they showed up. Our nostalgic thinking has them turning up at the manger scene, but historically it may be that they arrived when Jesus was a toddler, Careful reading of the gospel account does not specifically say that they arrived at the stable. Where and when they came, is not important. The fact that they did come is important. In 2000 years, most people have something else to do than take time to come to Jesus. Even religious people overlook Him and shun Him.

But Wise Men and Wise Women still seek Him, and they seek Him NOW the same way the Wise Men of old sought Jesus back THEN. When the Wise Men of old came to find Jesus in Bethlehem they focused on what they could give Him, and the first thing they gave Him was their time.

It was a long trip from the land of Babylon to the city of Bethlehem. Scholars differ in their assumptions of how long the nearly 1200 kilometre journey took with estimates between a couple of months to a few weeks, not including all the time it took for them to prepare for the journey to being with. But for these Wise Men (Magi), this was a the most important journey they'd ever take. Nobody and nothing was going to stand between them and their quest to see this "new born king".

The gift of time is one of the most important things we can give to Jesus. Without the freedom to meet together now, some realise just how much meeting with brothers and sisters on Sundays means to individuals, but more importantly tells Jesus how much He means to you. Perhaps, when we are able to freely meet together again, we might not take it so much for granted. Sadly, it might

not be too long before we fall back into our old ways again. But we can still make time to meet Him in our own homes. He promises us that “... **where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.**” **Matthew 18 verse 20.** In other words, if you and I consider Jesus important enough to spend time with others in His name, or to take time out for Him, He will consider us important enough to be there with us. He will honour us with His presence. That’s because Jesus recognizes the value of the time we take to worship Him, wherever that may be – at home, on a walk, up the mountain, in the garden - wherever. There will be those who excuse themselves from collective worship by saying that they can worship God anywhere. That is very true, but it should not be an excuse not to meet together – when we can – to worship together.

The 2nd thing the Magi gave Jesus was their treasure, expensive gifts. I wonder if they truly gave special thought to the gifts they were offering. One man told of going to a church that was so modern in its thinking that when they did the Christmas story, the three Wise Men are bringing gift vouchers. It would appear that God Himself had inspired their offerings:

- The Gold - presented to the infant King – indicated His royalty.
- Frankincense (an expensive resin that was used in religious offerings) spoke of His divinity.
- Myrrh (another expensive resin that was used in embalming) foretelling His death.

These were gifts given with a care and an adoration of this new born King. But as religious as their gifts were, they had a practical value the Magi may not have realized. In the following verses **Matthew** tells us that “**When (the Wisemen) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (verse 13).** What do you think Mary and Joseph used for money on their trip? How could they survive in a foreign country where they’d live as strangers, refugees, with no family and no immediate source of income? Now they had gold, and frankincense and myrrh to tide them over until they can get settled.

When we give of our treasures to Jesus those offerings should be given as a religious gift to God. You’re not giving your gifts to the minister, or to the church. They are being given to God.

Then, there was one last gift that the Wisemen gave Jesus. They gave Him the gift of changed lives. In **verse 11, Matthew** tells us that “**On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him...**” I don’t know what it was about being in the presence of Jesus then, but there was something about Jesus that brought these men to their knees. There was something about this Jesus that caused them to want to give Him gifts. There was something about this Jesus that caused them to want to give Him the best they had. That experience with Jesus changed even how they went home, “**they returned to their country by another route” (verse 12).** Realising that the original Grinch of Christmas wanted to harm this new born King, they heeded the warning in their dreams and bypassed the Palace of Herod and went on their way.

Once we come into the true presence of Jesus it changes everything about us, and the most important gift we can give to Jesus this year... is our lives. The final verse of the carol “In the bleak midwinter” sums it all up:

*“What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.”*