Come to Worship Him
Matthew 2:1-12

In his famous commencement address at Kenyon College, the American writer, David Foster Wallace, said: "There is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

And I think that's incredibly insightful. We all worship something. Now, that may find its outlet in organized religion, or it may be that you worship your personal freedom, and nothing can stand in the way of that. Or it might be career success, or the approval of others, or the pursuit of wealth, and you sacrifice stuff at those altars. But we're all worshipping something. We all have something that is of ultimate, non-negotiable significance to us.

And I tell you that because in this passage, Matthew introduces us to two groups of people, and one individual. And they're all worshippers. And what Matthew shows us is that what they worship profoundly affects the course of their lives and the lives of those around them. It always does, doesn't it? And that's what makes this matter for us.

Made for Worship
Now Matthew begins chapter 2 by telling us that when Jesus was born, v1, 'In the days of Herod the king,' in the days of power hungry politicians, men came to find him. Verse 1 again: 'Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."'

Now those words, *wise men*, translate the word Magi. And initially Magi were a tribe of Babylonian priests, but over time the name came to be used of Persian men who combined astronomy with astrology, and interpreted what they saw in the heavens, for the affairs of state. And Matthew tells us that a group of them made the journey to visit the infant Jesus.

But let's just be honest for a moment. Is this just a fairy-tale? Would Magi really have responded to something they saw in the heavens, interpreted that as political developments on earth, and set off on a journey across hundreds of miles of desert, at significant risk to themselves? And the answer is, absolutely. We know from history that this is exactly what Magi did. In fact some 70 years later a group of hundreds of Magi made an even longer journey to Rome to pay homage to the emperor Nero. So far from this being the stuff of fairy tales, what Matthew tells us fits precisely with what we know of Magi.

Ok, but what did they see in the heavens that could have made them do this? Well, look what Matthew says they said: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose." And those words 'when it rose' translate what at the time was a technical, astronomical term used by men like the Magi for the heliacal rising of a star: the date on which a star first appeared in the eastern sky before sunrise.

And Matthew says they described this star as 'his star'. The star of the one who has been born king of the Jews. So somehow this star told them a boy had been born who was the king of the Jews. More than that, from how they subsequently

responded, they must also have understood that there was something divine about him. So what could a star possibly do that could have told them that? Are we just back in the land of make believe? And the answer is, absolutely not.

In his recent book, *The Great Christ Comet*, Colin Nicholl, a New Testament scholar, working with Gary Kronk, editor the 6 volume *Cometography*, and the astronomers at the Armagh observatory, combines what Matthew reports the Magi saw, with what the apostle John describes going on in the heavens in Revelation 12, 'And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant… And another sign appeared in heaven: behold a great red dragon… She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron' (Rev 12:1, 3, 5). And what he shows is that a long-tailed comet, first appearing in the womb area of the constellation Virgo – the virgin – standing alongside the constellation Hydra, the dragon, at the time when the moon sits at Virgo's feet, would have done everything the Magi describe this star as doing. Seen from Babylon, it would have first risen in the eastern sky. It would then have crossed to the western sky, pointing towards Judea. And if the Magi made their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem at sunset, they would have seen this comet and its tail in the south-western sky, as if it was standing upright and pointing to the ground, pointing out the house where Jesus was.

And if you think that's all too incredible to believe, one professor of astronomy calls the book, 'erudite, engrossing and compelling'. Another says it's a 'formidable case.' But whether or not that was what happened, if you're tempted to dismiss the historicity of what Matthew describes, you've got to interact with the astronomical data first, because they have demonstrated that this is entirely possible.

But why would Persian Magi link such a star, or comet, to the king of the Jews? Well, one of their predecessors was a man called Balaam. And at the time of the Exodus, Balaam, was called upon to curse the people of Israel, but instead found himself forced to bless them. And in Numbers 24:17 he prophesied, 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.' In other words, a star will appear that speaks of a ruler coming out of Israel. And if what they saw was a comet, shaped like a sceptre, it's no wonder they said 'we have seen *his* star.'

Not only that, but these Magi would very likely have had Jewish colleagues, men like Daniel and Mordecai who stayed behind after the Babylonian exile and entered the service of the Persian kings. So when stuff started happening in the heavens that pointed to a new-born Jewish ruler, maybe it was they who directed them to the book of Isaiah. That what they were seeing in the constellation of Virgo, giving birth to a comet, was the heavenly sign of the virgin giving birth to a child, Immanuel, God with us.

And maybe that's why these Magi make the trip they do. You see, in the UK, when there's a royal wedding, or a jubilee, thousands get spent on incredible firework displays. What the Magi saw, with all its implications, must have been a heavenly display far greater than any Royal Fireworks.

It's why they say what they say when they get to Jerusalem: v2, "For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." So last week we saw gentile women taking their place in Jesus' family tree. Now we see gentiles, people like you and me, being the first to worship him.

But, if it's true that we all worship something, that's because we're all *made* to worship. We've been wired to delight in something. We've been hardwired for happiness, and so we seek it. But what the coming of the Magi teaches us is that we will only ever find that true happiness in Christ. You see, look how the Magi respond as they see the star pointing out the house: v10, 'They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.' Why? Because they had found the One they were seeking. Now, can you find joy in lesser things than God? Sure. But overflowing joy only comes when you find the thing you were made for.

John Newton, the former slave trader turned pastor who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, said: '[God] made us for happiness' but he also made us for himself. 'In vain we seek it elsewhere. Neither the hurries of business, nor the allurements of pleasure, nor the accomplishment of our wishes, can fill up the mighty void that is felt within.' Only God, Newton said, can ultimately satisfy our desire for happiness.

It's the joy that comes when you worship the One you were made to worship and not a cheap imitation. The joy that comes from sharing in God's own joy. The joy the apostle Peter calls 'joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory' (1 Peter 1:8). The joy that knows the seeking is over, that the journey has ended, and yet, in Christ, the happiness has only just begun.

But if joy is the first result of right worship, the second is what Matthew tells us they did when they saw Jesus face to face: v11, 'They fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.' And true worship, worship of the One you were made for, worship of the God who comes into our world and gives himself, always results in a giving of ourselves and our stuff, to him and to others. You cannot worship Jesus and be a tight-fisted Scrooge, can you? True worship of Jesus, the great, giving Son of God always leads to open hearts and open hands and open homes. It always results in a losing of yourself, that you might find yourself. But, worship yourself, make your personal freedom your god and you will increasingly close in on yourself and shut down on others. Worship wealth or career, and others will be shut out, as you pursue these other things.

But worship God in Christ, make him your delight and ambition, and you cannot but find generosity of heart and hand fizzing through your bones. Because if you are what you eat, you also become like what you worship.

But if that's how the Magi responded, what about Herod?

The Worship of Power

Now Herod has gone down in history as Herod the Great – not because he was a great hero, or of great character, but because he was an incredible builder of

public works – he rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem, he built new cities and fortresses, and numerous pagan temples in other cities. Not only that, he was a shrewd political mover.

But he wasn't a descendant of David. In fact, he wasn't even Jewish. He was an Idumean, an Edomite. And he had been appointed king by the Roman occupying forces. So when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem asking "where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod knows he has a problem. Because no-one could ever say that of him, could they? You could say Herod was *appointed* king. You could say he was born and would one day *become* king. But you could never say he was *born* king of the Jews. Only the rightful heir to the throne of David could say that.

So no wonder Matthew tells us, v3, 'He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.' Now, if he genuinely wanted the kingdom of God to come, he would have rejoiced at the prospect of the true king coming, wouldn't he? But he doesn't, because he sees Jesus as a threat.

You see, neither Herod, nor you or I, can be king when Christ is. If He is king, then we cease to be the one who rules. And the arrival of Jesus threatens everything that Herod wants. I mean, just think about it, what does Herod worship? Isn't it power and position? And he cannot see that threatened. He cannot imagine life as anything other than *King* Herod. His whole life and identity is tied up in him being king.

And that is what happens when you worship something other than God. You cannot face the thought of this thing being taken from you. You cannot imagine not being able to do sports, or having that position, or living that lifestyle, or having the approval of others. This is *you*, and you'll fight and resist anyone or anything that tries to take it from you, or life will cease to have meaning if it is taken from you.

And so when it comes to power, Herod is a case study in the corrupting effect of power, in what happens when power becomes what you worship. The Magi worshipped Jesus and generosity flowed. But over the next few years, history tells us that Herod became increasingly paranoid, and because he saw them as a threat, he had his own wife and sons murdered. He even organised for multiple Jewish leaders to be killed on the day of his death, so there would be mourning in Jerusalem on the day he died. He couldn't stomach the thought of going unnoticed. Why? Because what you worship always ends up controlling you and defining you. Even good things.

You see, where did Herod's power come from? When Jesus stood trial before Pilate, Pilate asked him, "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" and Jesus replied, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." So power and authority are God-given, given to men like Herod and Pilate, to use for the common good. But Herod makes power his god and it ends up eating him alive. Because even good, God-given gifts can corrupt, when you make them your god.

Several years ago I read an article on the social effects of the one child policy in China. And the author said the major problem was that the government had managed to create a nation of little Emperors. Every one thinks they're king. But that's not just China's problem is it? Like Herod, we too can want to be king or queen. And when our desire for self-rule, our wanting to be number 1 becomes the thing that defines us, it wrecks relationships and it ruins lives, and we see Christ as a threat.

And the reason we see Jesus as a threat, is because he is. Jesus is always a threat to our self-centredness. You see, when the first Christians raised the cry, 'Jesus is Lord' it was, and is, deeply revolutionary. Because if Christ is king, Caesar isn't, and neither is Herod. But neither are you or I.

Well, if Herod was hostile, what about the next group?

The Worship of Religion

Matthew tells us that in Herod's desire to locate the threat, v4, 'assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he enquired of them where the Christ was to be born.'

Now whilst they were descendants of Aaron, the first high priest, by this time, the chief priests were appointed by Herod. So, they owed their position to him. But the other group, the scribes, weren't appointed by Herod or anyone else. They were members of the Pharisees, who taught and applied the law of Moses. And in response to Herod's question they both tell him, v6, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet."

But then what do these priests and Bible scholars do? And the answer is, nothing! Magi have travelled hundreds of miles to see the long awaited Messiah, and the religious leaders stay right where they are.

Now how can you explain that apathy? Gentile pagans respond with worship and joy whilst the very ones who should have welcomed Christ with open arms, respond with seeming total indifference. No trip to Bethlehem for them. No falling on knees, no opening of treasures and giving of gifts for them. Why? Were they just cynical of another messianic claim? Were they frozen by fear of Herod? Possibly.

But the sad truth is that you can know the Bible, you can even teach the Bible, but still not know the God of the Bible or Jesus whom it points to. And they don't respond with joy-filled worship because this wasn't the god they were worshipping. Christ wasn't the one they were seeking. You see, you can be religious, you can go to church, you can read the Bible, you live an upright life, and still not be a worshipper of Jesus: and your heart and your hand doesn't open in response to him. Instead, religion, or morality can be your god. As the apostle Paul says: you can have a form of godliness, but deny its power.

And the tragedy for these leaders is that their apathy slowly morphs into antagonism and then outright rejection, and the day will come when they hand Jesus over to be crucified.

So as we finish, there is just one other player left.

The One to be Worshipped
It's interesting, isn't it, that even as a child, Christ divided people. That even as a child, people were forced to make a decision about Jesus. And in quoting the prophets, the religious leaders tell Herod that the Messiah will be 'a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel' (v6). But the fact the Magi worship him tells us that his rule extends much further than Israel. Is he the king of the Jews? Sure he is, but he is also the Lord of all, and all of us must decide how we will respond to him. Will we worship him, like the Magi, or something else?

But just think about it: who else, or what else compares with him? Through Micah's prophecy, Matthew tells us he is the shepherd king, and John Newton wrote, "I am prone to puzzle myself about 20 things, which are equally out of my power, and equally unnecessary, if the Lord be my shepherd." And when you know that Christ is your shepherd it gives you peace and poise in life that no other god can give you.

And the next time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus is called King of the Jews will be at his trial, where he is crowned with a crown of thorns and robed in a mocking purple cloak. And those same words will be nailed above his head, as he is enthroned on the cross, as the shepherd king becomes the sacrificial lamb, as he becomes our substitute and bears our sin.

And whilst Herod will kill his own family to maintain his power, this King gives up his life to save us, his subjects. Whilst Herod uses power to stay in power, Christ lays it all down that we might know his cleansing power.

And here we see the Magi giving their gifts to Christ, but the extraordinary thing about the gospel is that God so loved the world that he gave, not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but his Son, the one truly wise man, the one true king, the great High Priest, not to be served but to serve, and to give his life to rescue us. And it's because of that that when we get to the last book of the Bible, to Revelation chapter 5, the focal point of the worship that will go on for eternity, is Jesus, the Lamb upon the throne.

So let me ask you, what will you worship? What will you give your heart to? Will it be yourself on the throne, will it be something that can never give you true joy, or true peace, that in time will control you? Or will it be him?

Let me leave you with a quote from Charles Spurgeon: 'Doth not all nature around me praise God? If I were silent, I should be an exception to the universe. Doth not the thunder praise Him as it rolls like drums in the march of the God of armies? Do not the mountains praise Him when the woods upon their summits wave in adoration? Does not the lightning write His name in letters of fire? Hath not the whole earth a voice? And shall I, can I, silent be?'