Walking with the Wise
Matthew 2:1-12

Alongside all the joys of the year gone, you probably also faced stuff that at best stretched you, and at worst left you wishing it had never happened. But what will 2023 bring? The truth is, you don't know. But what you *can* do, is prepare yourself.

Listen to what Proverbs 13:20 says: 'Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise.' And one way to define what it means to be wise is to live life with skill. To face what life throws at you and handle it skilfully - with faith and poise.

So, this morning, I want us to walk with the wise - to look at the wise men arriving in Jerusalem and at how they handled their challenges and joys, and see what we can learn from them to help us face the year to come with skill.

So, I want you to consider four questions. Firstly, in 2023…

How Will Culture Shape You?
Look at v1, 'Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men *from the east* came to Jerusalem.'

And 'from the east' means they're most likely coming from Persia, because to describe them Matthew calls them *magi*. It's a technical term for pagan scholars who were the academics, scientists, astronomers, and philosophers of their day. Men who believed that life was intimately tied to the natural order and the movement of the stars. And one of their centres was ancient Babylon.

And so the magi who made the journey to Jerusalem would have been men immersed in their pagan culture. In fact, magi were the guardians of that culture, responsible for the formation of the ruling elite.

And yet, when *these* magi saw something in the stars that told them a king of the Jews had been born and they should go worship him, that he should have their allegiance, something that was a direct challenge to their prevailing culture, they were willing to swim against their culture.

Immersed in a world view contrary to the Bible, a world-view that trained them to think their kings were their gods or the representatives of the gods, when the evidence said 'head west, that's where you'll find the king you should worship,' they went.

Compare that to Herod. Because while he was not Jewish but Idumean, he'd been raised and immersed in Jewish culture with unlimited access to the Bible. And yet, when he wants to know where the Messiah will be born, he has to ask, because he doesn't know where to look. Sure, he knows who to ask, but he's had exactly the same access to the Bible as the priests and scribes he asks, but he's not made use of that privilege.

So, the magi are open to be drawn out of their pagan culture, while Herod has been closed to the blessings of the Jewish culture.

What's that got to do with you? Well, in the year ahead, we're all going to be shaped and formed by the culture we live in, whether that's through the media we consume, the films we watch, or the people we mix with. And the problem is, that culture's increasingly post-Christian. In fact, in many ways, it's increasingly like the pagan culture of the magi.

So, if you want to respond to the challenges and joys you're going to face in ways that are counter-cultural, that are more shaped by God and his word than the prevailing culture, then just like the magi, you're going to need to be open to the fact that our culture might have got things wrong. That like the magi discovered, truth and joy and satisfaction might lie westward - outside the prevailing culture rather than inside. That whether it's what you do with money, or how you value external appearance, or measure success, or view sexual identity, the ideas that this culture gives its allegiance to may be just as misplaced as that of the magi's.

Ok, but we can also learn from Herod. You see, like him, you have a rich alternative culture to draw from - a culture embedded in Church history and Christian community and God's word. But the danger - like Herod - is that you leave mining the riches of that culture to others.

So, in the year to come, consider, which culture is going to form you most?

But there's a second question the magi confront us with. In 2023…

What Will You Seek After?

Now, it's clear what the magi were seeking after. They came to Jerusalem, saying, v2, "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."

So, whatever they've seen, it's told them the King of the Jews has been born, that God has come in the flesh, because he's worthy of their worship. That's what they're seeking and they're prepared to travel hundreds of miles over dangerous desert to find it.

But what's Herod seeking? You'd be forgiven for saying 'exactly the same thing.' Because now, he too wants to find Jesus, just for different reasons. And yet, is it really Christ he's seeking? Sure he wants to find Jesus, but the only reason he wants that is so he can get what he's really after, and *that's* power. Unrivalled power.

And it's that desire for power that explains what Matthew says in v3, 'When Herod the king heard this [that magi had arrived and were seeking a newborn king], *he was troubled*, and all Jerusalem with him.' You see, whenever the thing you most want, the thing your life and desires are centred on, the thing you look to for meaning, or security, is threatened, you're going to be troubled. You're going to be anxious, or aggressive, or fearful.

And not just Herod. You see if the magi were prepared to travel hundreds of miles across desert to find what they're seeking, history tells us Herod was prepared to have his wife and sons murdered to get what he was seeking: the elimination of all rivals. So if any newborn king was as good as dead in the eyes of Herod, so was anyone else suspected of siding with him. And that's why when Herod's troubled *all Jerusalem's* troubled.

But it's also Herod's addiction to power that explains why he handles the magi the way he does. Verse 7, 'Then Herod summoned the wise men *secretly*.' Because knowledge is power, so Herod needs to control the narrative and stop news leaking out.

Ok, but if the magi are seeking Christ, and Herod is seeking power, what are the priests and scribes seeking? Because they have the same information as the magi and Herod, *and* they've got the Bible knowledge to fill in the gaps. But what do they do with that knowledge? You see, the coming of the Messiah was supposed to be what every Jew was looking for. But do they join the magi in seeking him? No. Instead, they're like someone who gets the answer to Wordle right and then gets on with their day. They have what the magi lacked - the answer, but they lacked what the magi had - desire. And so their Bible knowledge had zero impact on their lives.

But why their indifference? Were they afraid of Herod? Probably, and with good reason. But if so, what does that tell you about what they were seeking? It's that they want to be safe, to be left alone. So their desire is a nice, middle-class version of Herod's desire not to be threatened. To carry on living peaceful, well-to-do, respectable lives - untroubled by crazy kings or potentially crazy messiahs.

So, if that's the magi, Herod and the priests, what will it be for you in 2023?

Like the priests, it could be a quiet, undisturbed life; to hold God, or the hard stuff of relationships, or church life at arm length. But if you do, then like these religious leaders you'll miss out on what God's up to in Christ.

Or, like Herod, it could be to maintain control, to be your own king, to decide for yourself the direction of your life and pursue that power. The problem is, it's a form of self-harm, because you'll avoid anything that ties you down, or constrains or limits you, when all the really good things in life require a narrowing down of your life, because they require commitment. But instead you'll tend also see others as threats to your freedom, or be suspicious of their motives, or anxious of their abilities. And that'll damage your relationships because you'll find yourself trying to control others, or using them people, or putting them down. And that will leave them as anxious as Jerusalem under Herod.

But it'll also damage your relationship with God. You see, Herod's desire for power led him to try to kill Christ. You won't and can't do that. But resist Jesus' wisdom or authority in your life because you want to be king, and it will slowly kill your relationship with him.

Instead, the magi give us a much better model. Because they don't just seek Christ, they find him. And look what comes from their finding. Verse 9, they saw the star 'came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star [when they knew their seeking was over] they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.'

So, the priests miss out, while the magi are caught up in all that God is doing. Herod is troubled, constantly looking over his shoulder at threats, while the magi are joyful.

Look again at Micah's prophecy. The priests tell Herod that God's ruler will come from Bethlehem, and, v6, he 'will *shepherd* my people Israel.' Herod's willing to murder to achieve power, but Jesus will use his power to shepherd, not slaughter, to care for his flock, not kill them.

And when you know Christ's your Shepherd, watching over you and guiding you, you'll experience joy, not fear, even when you're feeling threatened. And you won't need to fight to defend your position. Instead, you can humble yourself and make yourself vulnerable to God and to others, because you know he's protecting you. And it's that humility that's the soil from which rich relationships - with God and others - grows.

So, in 2023, seek Christ, not comfort. Jesus said, 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matthew 6:33). The priests desired comfort - but don't you do that, Jesus says. Instead seek God and everything else will fall into place.

But secondly, seek Christ, not control. Preaching in Athens, Paul said that God has so arranged our lives that we '*should seek God,* and perhaps feel [our] way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.' (Acts 17:27). In other words, God is there to be sought, and found. And, as the writer to the Hebrews says, God 'rewards those who seek him' (Heb 11:6). And it won't just be you who benefits. Seek to put yourself at the centre of everything, and those around you suffer. Seek Christ at the centre of everything and you'll be a blessing, not a curse.

But as you do, third question…

What will guide you?
Now if you had asked the magi what had guided them to Christ, what would they have said?

They might have replied, 'the star.' Give them more time and they might have explained how years of studying the natural world, and scientific technique had helped them interpret what they were seeing. Give them still more time and they might have referred back to Balaam, the pagan prophet who was most likely a magi himself. Because right back when Israel was founded as a nation, in the exodus from Egypt, Balaam had been hired by Israel's enemies to curse them. But in one of his prophecies, Balaam saw something, some*one* in the blurry, distant future: Numbers 24:17, 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel'. And maybe the magi would have told you how, when they saw this star, they interpreted it through Balaam's lens.

And yet, how far had all that got them? To Jerusalem, but not to Bethlehem. They'd assumed, understandably, that if a king of the Jews had been born then they'd find him in Jerusalem. But that this king might be found among the least, not the greatest; that he'd come in weakness, not power; and be born into a manger, not a palace, had probably never crossed their minds. But, why would it? That would be totally illogical. I mean, what kind of God worthy of our worship would come among the poor?

So, all their learning, and even the star, had only got them so far. To get to Bethlehem, they needed the words of Micah; they needed God to speak to them, through his word: 'And you, *O Bethlehem*… from you shall come a ruler.' You see, even as they took the road south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and saw the star 'resting over the place where the child was' (Matt 2:9),

that star would have also aligned with any number of towns further south. But it was knowing what God had said in the Scriptures that helped them interpret the sign properly and that led them to Christ and to joy.

But they had to be open to God's word.

Herod got the same word. He also heard what Micah had to say. But he wasn't open to all its implications, at least not in a good way. Instead, what was guiding him was his own self-interest. He heard God's word, he even used it, but he wasn't receptive to it. He wasn't about to allow it to change him.

So, what will guide you in 2023? What will be your magnetic north? What will help you rightly interpret the stuff happening in your life?

Firstly, it should be your conscience. The magi were steeped in pagan culture, yet when their inner voice pricked them to investigate, they didn't squash it.

Now, of course, our consciences are far from perfect guides, but if this year you find your conscience warning you either to do or not do something, don't ignore it. Paul wrote to Timothy, 'hold [on to] faith *and a good conscience*. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.' (1 Timothy 1:19). And when you know your conscience is not what it should be, be willing to ask others. At Michael and Anna's wedding just before Christmas, Michael's friends who couldn't be there had put together a very touching video. And one of them, who had clearly had a number of personal difficulties in his life said, 'I came to look to Michael as my moral compass. If he said I shouldn't do something, I knew I shouldn't.' We all need friends like that.

But, as someone has said, conscience is like a skylight that lets in the light, so it's only as good as the light it lets in. So, like the magi, let God's word be the ultimate light that guides you. You see, as reliable or not as your inner voice is, more than anything you need a voice outside of you, a voice that challenges you while encouraging you; a voice that speaks a different word from the noise of culture on left or right; a voice that guides you to Christ and the joy you'll find in him. And the only thing that can do that is God's word through his Spirit.

So, whether you pick a Bible reading plan, or work your way slowly through one book of the Bible before moving on to the next, take a cleaning cloth to the skylight and let 2023 be the year the light floods in.

But, finally, as you do that, one last question.

Who or what will you worship and serve?
Look at v11: the magi saw Jesus and 'they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.'

Herod's reaction was very different, wasn't it. His reaction was to slaughter any boys in Bethlehem who might possibly be Jesus. But it didn't need to be like that. You see, Herod was as able and gifted as these magi. And while he could have been called *Herod the Power-Hungry*, he's gone down in history as Herod the Great because of the incredible building projects he undertook, from the Jerusalem temple, to great fortresses, to entire cities. And if he was infamous for his brutality,

and Caesar Augustus said, ‘I would rather be one of Herod’s pigs than one of his sons’, he was also famous for his organisational and architectural skills.

But what purpose had he put those gifts to? Whose glory had he served? The magi lay their best before Christ and made him the object of their adoration, but Herod had made his own pride and reputation the thing he adored, the thing his gifts served. The object of Herod’s worship, the thing he gloried in, was himself.

And that temptation, to worship and serve the creature, not the Creator, is one we’ll all face this year. And each temptation will boil down to ‘whose glory will you live for?’ Whose glory will you serve?

Why make it Christ’s?

And the answer is, that while Herod exalted himself, Jesus humbled himself. While Herod used, Jesus served. While Herod sought to kill, Jesus seeks to save; while Herod took life, Jesus gave his life. Because he’s the good shepherd who laid his life down for the sheep. And the degree to which you understand Christ’s sacrificial love for you at the cross, is the degree to which you’ll love him and adore him and serve him.

But as you do, you’ll face another temptation: the temptation to dismiss the whole thing. You see, we live in a disenchanted, highly materialistic age, when all that seems to matter is the external and the physical. But Christianity calls you to something supernatural, something you can’t see or touch.

So, as we finish, look how the magi quit the stage. Herod asked them to report back once they’ve found Jesus. But, v12: ‘Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.’

Up until now they’ve probably had no idea Christ has been born into a spiritual war zone, where he is target no 1, a battle they’re now caught up in. So they could have just dismissed the dream. Like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, they they could have put it down to indigestion, an undigested bit of beef, or too much time spent on the back of a camel sniffing frankincense and myrrh. They could have gone with plain human reason, with the world they can see and touch, ‘I mean, that guy Herod seemed perfectly charming to me!’ But they didn’t.

And our disenchanted, materialistic culture will try to squeeze the supernatural out of you. It’ll try and numb you to spiritual realities, and have you live and serve all these lesser glories, and kill your adoration of Christ. Don’t let it. Instead, be aware of the battle and, as Paul writes, ‘seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.’ (Col 3:1-2)

So, in 2023, make use of the riches that are yours in Christian culture; seek Christ and find him and the joy that comes with him; be guided by his word; and worship and serve him as the One who sought and saved you.