So this morning we come to the third and final message in our advent series. Just to recap, 3 weeks ago, if you can remember that far back, Martin preached a sermon on the problem and the promise in which he discussed how mankind is in a mess without the Messiah, Jesus Christ and we looked at God's plan of redemption through the Old Testament prophecies. Last week we enjoyed a wonderful Christmas carol service with a fantastic play by our young people and some incredible saxophone playing I might add, (Martin asked me mention), followed by a message about how Christmas is about the coming of a saviour who would rescue us from the mess we were in. And so this morning we are going to look at some of the responses to Jesus' coming to our world. We will hop around the scriptures a little but spend the majority of time in Matthew 2 and Luke 2 as we focus on the variety of reactions we have recorded to the birth of the Saviour.

As I was lying in bed last night thinking about my sermon it struck me that last time I preached I preached on Jesus if anyone remembers; I preached on Jesus as a boy, now I'm going back and preaching on Jesus as a baby! But either way I'm preaching on Jesus and so I'm really excited and yet feel this real weight of responsibility to preach to you the Jesus of the Bible. So many people have their perceptions of who Jesus was or is and I bet we are so wrong about so much but what a fascinating person! I'm reading a book at the moment called 'The Jesus I never knew' and it stuns me the more I study Jesus and think about who he really is, what he actually says and what he actually did on earth. Who can fully explain this person? I love how the author of the book, Philip Yancey says it, he said "…the more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeon-hole him. One minute he could be filled with sympathy for a stranger and the next he would turn and rebuke one of his best friends with such strong words as 'get behind me Satan'. He had totally uncompromising views on rich men and loose women yet both desired his company…one day miracles seemed to flow out of Jesus, the next day his power was blocked by peoples' lack of faith. He talked about peacemaking then told his disciples to procure swords. His extravagant claims about himself kept him at the centre of controversy" One person said, "If Jesus had never lived we would never have been able to invent him!" Guys, if you're not already I want you to get really excited about Jesus this morning! Fix your eyes upon him, study him, study his words, watch films about him, talk about him, ask questions about him, talk to him! Get to know him. If you don't get anything else out of this morning's message, please take this advice: go and get to know this Jesus.

So this morning we'll see how such a character creates such diverse responses. Some oppose him even at his birth, others bow down and worship Him, and there are even those who are indifferent towards Jesus and turn a blind eye to the greatest man that ever walked the Earth. But before we judge other peoples reactions, let's examine our own responses to Christ. As Jesus himself said, let's not be so bothered about a speck of sawdust in someone else's eye that we miss the plank of wood in our own! (Matthew 7:3) The bible tells us that we will all be judged for the way we react to Jesus. The scary thing is we can be just like those that we will be discussing today; we can continue to live in our own little world and ignore the joy that is available in Jesus Christ. We can openly reject the Lordship of Christ for our lives completely or we can fall down and worship him as God and give him the praise that he deserves.

And so let's pray

Ok, the first response will look at this morning is the shepherds. So turn with me to Luke 2 verse 8 and if you don't have a bible it will also hopefully appear on the screen behind me…

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

So Response # 1: The Response of the Shepherds: Positive, immediate.

The first stage of the shepherd's response can be read of in verse 15. It says the shepherds turned to each other, and encouraged each other, and spoke positively to each other, about what they had just heard. Now before we look at how these shepherds actually do respond, I want to look at how they could've responded but didn't: they weren't filled with skepticism or say *"Yeah but let's see <u>if</u> this thing really does actually happen"* but *"let's go see this thing that has happened"!* Notice, the shepherds don't say anything about the messengers that brought them the message: the angels. They recognize their messengers as God speaking directly to them. Let's be honest, how often do we refuse to respond to messages that come to us from God because of who he decides to use. It could be a preacher we don't particularly agree with, it could a family member we struggle with, it could be a brother or sister at church or it could even be an unbeliever, in fact it might even be a donkey as it was for Balaam! It's true that people's character is important and we should judge carefully what we hear, but often are too skeptical, too critical, too judgmental to hear God! Or at least I am! I think it is fair to say that sometimes we are more focused on the messenger or how something is said (tone etc) than with what is actually being said!

I really feel like we have a lesson to learn from these excited shepherds. Do you respond to Jesus like these guys; I picture them grabbing each other with excitement at what God's doing? Sadly, I'm not sure I am always so excited at what the Lord is doing or saying to me. Sometimes I am, but if we really think that God is involving us in His plan we should be overjoyed! Do you speak positively to others about what you have seen and heard and are experiencing? About the things God is doing in your life? This is true fellowship: building one another up, getting excited about he things of God together. I hope you have friends that you do this with; they are such a blessing. We need this!

Something else for us to learn from the shepherds' here is how quickly they respond to God. Verse 16 tells us *'they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.'* The shepherds didn't linger or put it off. They didn't say, "Nah I think I'll wait for the right opportunity" or, "I'll wait till I'm in the right mood and in the right frame of heart." They didn't debate the matter. I'm sure we all have a million and one excuses why we can't respond to God immediately but let's be like these shepherds who *'went with haste.'*

Don't wait for a better time to respond to God. The quieter day probably won't come! Respond immediately. These shepherds didn't come all prepared and ready. They brought nothing but themselves – no gifts, no little lambs, nothing. They just turned up in their rags, they probably didn't even shower. It's really important that you know this morning that you don't have to get yourself all sorted to come to Jesus. He's the one who will sort you. As the famous hymn goes, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to the cross I cling!" They had nothing to offer Jesus but themselves, and it's the same for us.

God just wants you. Listen to what 2 Chron 16:9 says *'The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.'* Are you that person? Fully committed to him? As the eyes of the Lord search the earth does he find you to be one who responds to him in joyful (and quick) obedience when he calls?

And finally we read in verse 20 that *'the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.'* These shepherds were overwhelmingly excited and couldn't help but praise God and speak of His goodness. This is always the case when we respond to God's calling. This is the great joy of the Christian life. God is so incredibly good to us and His will so perfect for us that we become overjoyed not over-laboured or over-burdened. As we respond to Jesus like these shepherds we will find that we overflow with praise and gratitude because of him. As you obey God's will for your life you'll find that you can't help but speak about him and you cant help but sing about him and surrender more to him. You become a witness of Jesus and the great things that he has done. Like these shepherds, you just can't keep quiet.

Matt Redman sings about this in one of his songs where he writes "Let worship be the fuel for missions flame," and that's exactly what we see going on here. As the shepherds worship Jesus they go out on a mission burning with passion about him. And as we worship God he sets us on fire for him and as we burn with zeal for God it becomes contagious for our Christian brothers and sisters and enviable to those who do not yet know him.

Which brings us to our second response this morning: The response of the wise men.

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, 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….and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and

worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-2 & 9-11)

Response # 2: The wise men: To bring an offering of worship

These wise men are often the humorous subject of our nativity sketches as they come bobbing up and down onto the scene on their camels, they follow a star travelling a great distance to honour King Jesus; but have you ever wondered why? Don't you think it seems a bit odd? After all they're not even Jewish. Why would they make this huge journey to worship this little Jewish baby? At that time, as has always been the case sadly, throughout history, the Jewish people were a minority, often despised and dishonoured because of their unique customs and beliefs, and even their success and prosperity. It's remarkable that these well respected, highly intelligent, learned superiors which is what they were, would trouble themselves so much to honour a baby born in a stable, but especially one who was said to be a King of the Jews.

There's many suggestions about this star they followed. And we are not going to focus too much on it this morning. Some say it was a conjunction of planets; others suggest a supernova, and some think of comets or constellations. Whatever it was, what is significant is that God met these wise men (and there were very probably more than 3!) in their own medium: He guided the astronomers by a star. But these wise men were not satisfied just to look at the star and admire it; they did something about it, and set out and followed it with the same kind of urgency as the shepherds. They sought Jesus, they persevered in their search for him, even when it led them to the wrong place at first (to Jerusalem) they continued and they found Him. They found what every one of us who have ever looked for him has found. That if we seek God he is faithful to be found by us. Listen to what Jesus himself says in Luke 11:9-10, *'And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.'* This is the promise of God for every single person or group of people. And if you are here for the first time this morning and have never heard this before or maybe you have heard it before but have not responded, or maybe you are a child of God and you're seeking him this morning about something specific remind Jesus of his promise as you continue to ask, to seek , to knock. He has to answer. It is his word. It's not a one-off, the Greek implies continual seeking. But going back to anyone who's here this morning and you have never put your fait and trust in Jesus, the bible says that 'all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' All who seek Him find Him. Respond to Jesus this morning. Seek him while may be found.

So these wise men sought Jesus, and when they found him they worshipped Him. Even at the cost of travel and time, an arduous journey; even risking their lives before King Herod. They were worshippers and when they worshipped, it was to give something. You know worship involves sacrifice. That sacrifice is us; you and me. With the young people we have been talking about Romans 12:1-2 a lot recently which tells us that to be a living sacrifice is our spiritual act of worship. If you were to ask what is worship this morning, it is many things but it's far more than just singing. Worship is us devoting ourselves; sacrificing our lives to Jesus. Worship will cost each one of us. These wise men brought gifts to Christ we bring him ourselves.

Listen to how the old English preacher Charles Spurgeon put it "We see a wonderful pattern here: "Those who look for Jesus will see him: those who truly see him will worship him: those who worship him will devote themselves to him." And so like these wise men let's be prepared to make the sacrifice for Jesus, after all he sacrificed himself for us. Let's be worshippers of Jesus.

And now we come to the third response to Jesus in our study this morning; the response of King Herod.

When Herod the king heard this (what he had been told by the wise men), *he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born….Then Herod…became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:3-4 & 16)*

Response # 3: The Response of Herod: Hatred & opposition

Here we see a very contrasting reaction to Jesus when compared with the shepherds and the wise men. We read that *'when Herod the king heard this he was troubled'* Just to give a very brief history of Herod; this notorious ruler was constantly on guard against threats to his rule, especially from his own family. He assassinated family members who he suspected of disloyalty. But the question is why was Herod so troubled at this young seemingly helpless child? Why did this humble birth cause such a reaction? For the same reason Jesus Christ causes so much controversy today. Spurgeon explains "Jesus of Nazareth is so potent a factor in the world that, no sooner is he there in his utmost weakness, a new-born King, than he begins to reign. Before he mounts the throne, friends bring him presents, and his enemies plot his death." (Spurgeon) Jesus is incredibly controversial; he was then, he is now.

Herod displayed an open hatred and hostility toward Jesus because he felt he was threatened by him. Now before we judge Herod, and we would all agree that Herod's actions were horrific (murdering every child under 2) and I'm sure we will never do anything of the sort but whilst Herod's reaction was severe, there are times when we can try and suffocate Jesus in our own hearts and minds, because, like Herod we all want to be King of our own lives. We want the throne of our lives. Don't you find yourself doing that at times? You don't like what he's saying so you smother his voice? But even though we can be so selfish and so strong willed and so unwilling to surrender, yet Jesus extends his wonderful grace to us.

As the famous hymn penned by John Newton goes 'Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.' Those lyrics bring me such comfort and hope. That God would have stretched out his hand even to save someone who opposed him so strongly: Herod had he repented. As the apostle Paul said in his first letter to Timothy (and remember Paul opposed Jesus more than anyone in his words) *'I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord*

overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 1 Tim 1:12-15

And finally the fourth and last response I want to look at this morning is that of the Chief Priests & Scribes**.** Now here is a group in Jerusalem who do not seem to be very prominent in the story, yet their response is in many ways even worse than Herods' and certainly very typical of people's responses to Jesus today.

Turn back to Matthew chapter 2 again, and in verse 3 we read**, '***…and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he (that is Herod) inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"(Matthew 2:4-6)*

Response # 4: The Response of the Chief Priests & Scribes: Indifference

I personally find this reaction the saddest of them all. The chief priests and the scribes of the people (literally, the teachers of the Jewish faith) who should have been the most excited at the fulfilment the prophecies which were given to them; they had been waiting thousands of years for this glorious fulfilment; now their Messiah has arrived and yet what do we see? Disbelief, apathy and a disinterest in meeting him. It's so sad but these experts in religion had the right information but seem personally uninterested in meeting the Messiah for themselves.

These religious elites were indifferent toward Jesus, all the while retaining their religious respectability. We don't see them getting excited about Jesus like the shepherds or coming to worship him as the wise men. You would at least think they would begin to wonder what was happening when King Herod starts making such a diligent inquiry as to the birth place of Messiah. But we see no response to the news from them. No indication that any of them even went down to Bethlehem (only about 6 miles away from where they were in Jerusalem) to check it out.

Indifference towards Jesus is deadly. And I'm not just talking about those outside the church but here we are dealing with the religious one's. We can know all about Jesus, even have accepted his gift of salvation and yet be disinterested and apathetic towards him. You know it is right where our enemy (the Devil) would want us. Jesus deserves a reaction. In fact in His own words he would rather you were set against him than not bothered by him at all. Listen to Jesus' plea when writing to one of the seven churches in Revelation, *'"I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, I will spit you out of my mouth! You say, `I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked…Be diligent and turn from your indifference. "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends.* (Revelation 3:15-20 NLT)

These verses are often used in evangelism to unbelievers but Jesus is speaking to the Church here. The frightening reality is that this could be any one of us this morning. You may have become like lukewarm water spiritually. There is nothing worse than taking a big mouthful of tea that has gone to room temperature. You really do feel like spitting it out! The imagery Jesus uses is powerful; God doesn't want his church lukewarm or at room temperature! So what do we do? Verse 18-20 tells us we go to Christ and worship him and open the door to him and receive from him.

The response of the Chief Priests & the Scribes could possibly have been the worst of all. They tried to ignore what was going on and just continue doing their own thing. But some 30 years later they could no longer ignore Jesus because he was now preaching to them, saying *"repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* So they thought of a solution. 'Get rid of Jesus and we can continue in our old ways again.'And so that is what they did. They plotted, and eventually managed to have Him crucified. At last, they could continue with their religion; in their old traditional ways. But Jesus didn't stay in the grave. He conquered sin and death because the grave could not keep Him. And through His death and resurrection, the old ways were made worthless, for a new covenant was established, and now we can go to God directly through Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross. He Himself is now the mediator between us and God. The religious priesthood is no longer of any value. The religious leaders tried to ignore Jesus, but He would not go away.

Conclusion

So what about you? What is your response to Jesus this morning? Are you like the shepherds; responding immediately**,** positively & with real excitement about what God is doing in your life? Are you worshipping Him like the wise men; even at great cost as you surrender your life to Him? Do you rejoice with "exceeding great joy" over Jesus, the Messiah, the one who saves us from our sins?

Or perhaps your response to Jesus is more like Herods'. You realize that Jesus is a threat to your current lifestyle and you don't want to change. If so, you are right, Jesus does demand a change. He requires that we must *"pick up our cross and follow Him"* Luke 9:23. This offer from Jesus still stands and is to all men including everyone here this morning: If you turn away from your sin, your current lifestyle, and put your faith and trust in Jesus, he will save you and give you everlasting life.

Or maybe you are like the religious leaders this morning. You've been brought up going to church every Sunday. You know all the right answers like these teachers did and you may even do quite a few religious things like come to church, but they make no difference in your life. You have virtually no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact you would rather do your own thing without Jesus' involvement. You would rather be left alone and not bothered by Him. You may know how to make it look like your doing well in front of others but as Jesus himself said in Matthew 15:8, 'you honour God with your lips but your heart is far from him. Is your heart far from Him this morning? If you know it is then seek him and you will find him. Ask God to come in and revolutionize your life. We are promised that if we seek God we will find Him, when we seek him with all our heart (Jer 29:13)

My prayer and desire for you this morning is that if you have not yet found Him, whether you have been going to church for years or this is the first time you have ever heard this; that today would be the day that you meet Jesus. If you feel stirred this morning, please don't put it off. Talk to someone who knows Jesus. Talk to Martin or one of the church leaders or myself. Get to know Jesus Christ today. Don't put it off. Respond to Jesus immediately.

Ok, let's pray.