In Search of Happiness
Matthew 2:1-12

So despite the fact that Christmas was only two days ago, if yours is anything like ours, I suspect your Christmas tree is already beginning to wilt and some of you, I suspect, are already looking forward to the New Year festivities. But before we leave Christmas behind, I want us to take one last look – because in the gospels, neither Matthew or Luke are in any hurry to rush on, are they? They take a longer look than 'Jesus was born, and now let's get on with the main story.' Luke tells us how when Jesus was 40 days of age Joseph and Mary took him to the temple, where Anna and Simeon, these two old and faithful saints, prophesied over him. And Matthew extends it even further, and in his account of the visit of the Magi, the wise men, which we're going to look at this morning, Jesus is probably by now two years of age. And so if the gospels are in no rush to move on, let's just take one last look at the events of Jesus' birth and infancy. And I want to do that for a reason.

You see, as we read the account we're going to look at this morning, I want you to notice something, and that is that *joy* gets mentioned, again. Because whether it is in our inner lives, or our daily lives, or our marriages and families, so often what we are looking for is happiness, isn't it? That inner sense of well-being that things are ok, that life is good. But what's interesting is that if you read the gospel accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, happiness and joy keep on getting mentioned. It's as if the events were surrounded and infused with joy. The angel announced to the shepherds, 'good news of great joy that will be for all the people.' When the shepherds discovered the truth about Jesus for themselves, Luke tells us 'they went on their way glorifying and praising God' – meaning their joy bubbled over in expressions of praise. When Simeon took the baby Jesus up in his arms, Luke tells us he blessed God – his happiness at seeing this day overflowed in thankfulness. And Anna, she did the same. And as we're going to see, when the Magi arrive, their coming is once again marked by joy.

Let's read it together:

Matthew 2:1-12

The Search for Joy
Jonathan Edwards, the 18th Century New England theologian wrote that 'the great enquiry of the world in general, in all ages of it, is after happiness.' In other words, what everyone in every age is searching for is happiness. And he's right, isn't he. None of us want to be miserable, none of us want to be unhappy – and when we do go into a sulk it is invariably because our happiness has been thwarted in someway by someone, and we think by having a sulk we'll get what we want, so we can be happy. And even those people who seem only to be happy when they are miserable, or complaining, are that way precisely because they are happiest like this. And if someone tries to help them resolve their problem, some will then find something else to be unhappy about, because this is what makes them happy.

And it's because this pursuit of happiness is what so drives us as humans, that Jesus began his famous Sermon on the Mount by telling us, 'Blessed are they

who…' happy are they… If you want to be truly happy, he says, let me tell you how you can experience that in reality.

And so look at these Magi, as they see the star pointing them to the house in Bethlehem were Jesus is: Matthew tells us in v10, 'When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.' In other words – they had exceedingly great joy in their great joy! Why? Because, at last, they had found what they were looking for. They had come to the end of their search. This trip that had begun with them seeing the star rising in the east; that had, in all likelihood, sent them to the Old Testament prophets, who spoke of a coming king, of a star rising out of Jacob and a sceptre from Israel (Num 24:17); a trip that had likely taken them weeks in the planning and then in the execution, and now they had arrived. They had found the One they were searching for, and their joy overflowed.

Now you might hear that and think, sure, but what has the joy these 1st century stargazers experienced at the end of a sticky, sweaty, sandy journey on the back of some smelly camels got to do with my day-to-day happiness?

Well, the first answer to that is that these Magi were our forerunners. You see in numerous places in the Old Testament the Prophets spoke of a time when the gentiles, people like you and me, would turn to the God of Israel. The prophet Isaiah, speaking of the Messiah, said 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you… and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising' (Is 60:1-3). And then both Isaiah and Micah predicted a day when the mountain of the house of the Lord would be lifted up, 'and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come' (Mic 4:1-2).

So the prophets foresaw a day when multitudes from every nation and every people group on earth would turn to the Lord and his Messiah, and if you know anything about the growth of the church in the last 2000 years, or what is going on across the world in places like China and South America and Africa today, you'll know that that flow of people is in full flood. But like every great river it began with a trickle, with these gentile, pagan Magi, making the journey to Bethlehem and experiencing the joy of finding what they were seeking in Jesus.

And so these men act as a yearly reminder to us that whatever your nationality, whatever your ethnic or religious background, there is only one God, who wants us to know him, and that the happiness that we're all seeking can only, ultimately be found in him, and by us turning to him in repentance and faith.

But if that's one reason why these travellers have got something to say to us, the way their response differs from the powerful people and the religious people of their day is another. Because their joy on finding Jesus is in stark contrast to that of Herod and the chief priests, isn't it?

Troubled Fear or Generous Joy?

So the Magi arrive first in Jerusalem, and start asking around, 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." But then look at King Herod's response: 'When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled' (2:3).

Now, why is Herod troubled? Why does the prospect of there being a new-born king of the Jews, a prospect that brings these Magi travelling from hundreds of miles away, that when they find him brings them overflowing joy, result in Herod being troubled? And that is an understatement isn't it – because we know from what Matthew tells us later that Herod is so troubled that he has all the boys aged under two in Bethlehem executed.

So, why does this news that brings joy to others result in anxiety and fear and murderous trouble in Herod's heart? Because he feels threatened. Herod – who was only half-Jewish at best – had been appointed king of Judea by the Roman occupying forces some 30 years previously, and so the thought of a true Jew, one from the royal line of David, being born and being hailed as the rightful King of the Jews, would have seriously threatened who Herod thought he was. He wanted to be king, he wanted to be the one in charge, he wanted to be the one exercising power and anything or anyone – whether it was members of his own family or his inner circle, as we know from history – anything that threatened that, he dealt with ruthlessly.

And so this new-born baby, the Lord Jesus, was a threat to his power, and because his power, his being king was who he was, because he could not imagine being anything other than king, he saw Jesus as a threat to his whole identity. So, in his eyes, he thought his whole survival, he thought his happiness, depended on exterminating that threat.

Compare that to the Magi. They arrive, and in their joy, v11, 'Going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.' Herod wanted to preserve his power so he held on with an iron grip, and in the process said goodbye to real joy. The magi fall on their knees in worship and out of their joy they open their hands and give away some of the most valuable stuff they possessed to Jesus.

It's interesting, isn't it? In his desire to hold on, Herod misses the very thing that would give him what he is searching for – that sense of inner wellbeing and security we call happiness. And so often in our desire to be the one who sits on the throne of our lives, in our seeming need to be the centre, in our desire to be number one, the king, we miss out on the very thing same thing, which only comes when we allow God to be God and not ourselves or anything else, and we allow Christ to take the place of king in our lives. And don't you think it's ironic, as Herod and the Magi so beautifully demonstrate, that the person who wants to and tries to hold on is the one who ends up more miserable and more closed and more unhappy, but the one who in their joy at finding Christ as king gives away generously, finds ever more joy?

But the Magi aren't just in stark contrast with Herod, the powerful. They are also in stark contrast with the religious.

Joyful Risk or Studied Indifference?
Just think for a moment about what the Magi's trip has meant for them. They have travelled hundreds of miles, over some fairly inhospitable terrain, at danger to themselves and any family they left behind. So, they were prepared to risk, to sacrifice, to go through a desert, for the one they knew to be King of the Jews.

Contrast that to the religious leaders. Verse 4 tells us that Herod assembled 'all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [and] he enquired of them where the Christ was to be born.' So here are the men, the priests, who of all men would know where the Messiah was to be born, who of all men should be filled with a sense of wonder and excitement at the prospect that the Messiah, their king had come. And in once sense, they don't let us down, do they? They do know where he was to be born: verse 5, 'they told [Herod], "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.'"

So they understand the implications of what they are being told – that the Messiah might have been born. They know the Scriptures and can quote the Scriptures to tell others where that likely happened. But then what do they do? And the answer is, *nothing*. The gentile Magi have travelled for weeks over hundreds of miles of desert to welcome the King of the Jews, and the Jewish religious leaders wont even make the short trip from Jerusalem to nearby Bethlehem to see him. As the apostle John wrote, 'He came to his own and his own did not receive him' (John 1:11).

But over time, that seeming indifference to Christ on the part of religious people took its toll, didn't it? Over the years of Jesus' life and ministry, that lack of interest slowly morphed into open hostility, until it is the High Priests agitating the crowd in front of Pilate to demand that Jesus be crucified. And so what Herod failed to do, have Jesus killed, the religious succeeded in doing. And in the end, their indifference to Jesus was just as murderous as Herod's outright opposition. But what is true for the religious people of Jesus' day can be sadly true in our own day can't it? Whether it's in churches, or university theology departments, the good news of all that God has and is accomplishing through Jesus, can be first neglected and then, over time, be opposed.

And of course a similar state of affairs can exist in our own hearts, can't it? Like the priests, we can know the Bible in our heads, we can know the stories of Christmas by heart, but we don't know its message *in* our hearts. We can be religious, but without any of the deeply humbling, worship-inducing power of true religion at work in our hearts.

And compare the outcome for the Magi and the priests. The Magi experience overflowing joy that results in self-sacrificial worship of Jesus. But over time the priests just become more angry and more nasty. As Jesus himself said to them, "You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Matt 23:13). In other

words, they tried to stop others discovering the joy that is found in Christ, and in the process they shut themselves out of that same joy, both in time and eternity.

So as you look at one response of sacrifice and risk, ending in joy, and the other of indifference ending in bitterness and opposition, just take a moment to reflect on your own heart. To what extent am I willing to sacrifice, to deny myself for Christ and the greater joy that comes, or am I just prone to go for the passing pleasure of sin now? What risks, what efforts am I taking to seek him out in deeper knowledge and more heart-felt worship that will increase my joy and sense of security and well-being in him, or am I largely indifferent? And if at the moment it feels as though the Lord has led you and guided you into a desert, just consider, am I willing to continue walking through that desert for the joy in Christ that lays ahead, or will I try and find an escape route, to an easier life, but one which bypasses Christ and his joy?

But before we leave the chief priests, did you notice that it wasn't just Herod who was troubled by what the Magi had to say? Verse 3 again, 'When Herod the King heard this he was troubled, *and all Jerusalem with him*.' And there's a heavy suggestion there that the chief priests and scribes weren't just indifferent, but that they were as troubled as Herod was about this news. Why?

Well, maybe they saw the coming of a potential Messiah as a threat to their own influence and authority. Maybe they feared the instability that might arise if the Romans and Herod and now a messiah figure were all jockying for power. Or maybe they were just afraid of Herod. And if he was troubled, they were troubled.

And, sadly, sometimes we can think that the devil we know is better than the Jesus we don't know, if you're not yet a Christian, or if you are the Jesus you don't know as you could know. And we'd rather try and keep this thing – this *'Herod'* in our lives, whether that is some sin that has us under its control, or some wrong relationship, happy and placated, than repent of our sin, and take the risk of finding Jesus in deeper and greater reality. But again, it's only as Christ's light shines in our darkness and we come out from under the shadow of that dark controlling power, that we will ever know this deep inner security and joy that these priests knew nothing of.

So, if both power and religion can keep us from true happiness, if they blind us to what is truly worthy of our worship and get us to worship the trivial and the puny, how can you and I be more like these wise men, and less like Herod and the priests?

Christ, the true king and true priest

One of the extraordinary things about the visit of these men is the appropriateness of the gifts they bring. Verse 11, 'Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.' Gold for the one who in Paul's words, 'though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor' (2 Cor 8:9). Gold for the king born in the line of David, a king far more good than Herod was bad.

Then frankincense: As the priests in Jerusalem declined to visit, the Magi gave Jesus a gift of something the priests used daily in the temple, the incense that symbolised Christ's role as an eternal high priest, *the* chief priest.

You see it's this infant who the king wants killed and the priests want to ignore who is the true king and the true priest.

But think how Jesus will exercise both those roles. It's what the Magi's third gift points to, isn't it: myrrh - the resin used to anoint the dead. And Jesus is the true king who will give his life for his people, whilst Herod just took their lives. He is the shepherd ruler that Micah prophesied would come, who would lay down his life for his sheep, not a butcher ruler, like Herod, who slaughtered them. And Matthew tells us that the Magi recognised Jesus as the King of the Jews, and the next time Matthew uses that term is when Jesus was crucified and those words were nailed to the cross above his head – 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. So, this is the King before whom the wise men kneel. The one true king who sacrifices his life to save his people, people like you and me.

And how does he exercise his ministry as High Priest? Not by offering animal sacrifices as these priests did, but by offering himself, as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So, the incredible thing is that these gifts the Magi give Jesus point to him being the greatest giver of all, of who he is and what he will do. And if these wise men just had the slightest hint of that, it is no wonder they worshipped him.

But it's also no wonder the joy they had in finding him. And that same joy can be yours and mine, and, like them, it can result in the sacrificial worship and generosity they showed. Because when you know that the King of Kings and heaven's great high priest, humbled himself and was born as a human, and went to the lowest place at the cross, that you might be forgiven your sins and know the love of your heavenly Father, and be adopted as his child, and be made rich with every spiritual blessing in Christ, then it deeply humbles you and leads you to repentance, even as it fills your heart with gladness and thankfulness. And you can know a security that no amount of holding on, like Herod, can give you. And it can give you a sense of wellbeing that the religious coldness and indifference of the priests knows nothing of. And when you know who Jesus is, and what he has done for you, you'll bow in wonder before him as these men did.

But I want to leave you with something GK Chesterton, the English writer, said. He wrote that the man knocking on a brothel door, is a man looking for God. The guy cruising the red light district is searching for something that will make him happy, that will fill that emptiness in his soul, and he thinks that sex will do it. But ultimately only God can. He's knocking on the wrong door. And whatever door you and I are knocking on, whether that is the door of power or religion or money or relationships or sex, only Christ can give us the real, lasting happiness we all seek. You see, the Magi knocked at the right door, because Christ is the end of the search.