

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (19-12-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Three Reactions to Christ

Matthew 2:1-23

Introduction

One of the fascinating things about the Gospel stories is that men and women are repeatedly brought face to face with Christ. And they have to make up their minds about Him and do something about Him. Nothing is new under the sun, and what was true 2000 years ago is still true today. Man has not changed. Christ has not changed. The Gospel has not changed. Christ still confronts men – through the Word, through every text on a Christmas card, through the text in the wayside pulpit, the tract or the leaflet through the door, the sermon, the act of witness.

The story of the wise men going to see Jesus has acquired many legends over the years. Some say *three* wise men, but no proof. Because there were three gifts? Only assumes there was one gift per wise men, not necessarily so. The wise men have acquired names and descriptions –Caspar, young, beardless, ruddy face; Melchior, old, grey and bearded; Balthasar, swarthy and with newly grown beard. Some of the surrounding legends even describe the ornaments on the dromedaries' necks.

Urgent need to cut straight through tangled mess and undergrowth of sentiment, platitudes and empty myth, and go straight to heart of message, and face what it has to say to us. Who was this child? Why did He come? What does it mean to us now?

He was Emmanuel – God with us. The second person of the Godhead, God the Son, who took human flesh. God became man for the salvation of hell-bound sinners. Compared with this, what is knowledge of all things besides? God became man – the Saviour – **because He will save His people from their sins** (Matthew 1:21).

Then and now, there are three attitudes men may take – negative, neutral, or positive. Outright objection, indifference, or seek till they find.

Negative responses – outright rejection

King Herod – we know a great deal about him. The Bible account fits in perfectly. He was half Jew and half Edomite. Made “King of the Jews” 40-4BC by the Romans. “Herod the Great” – great in many ways. Kept law and order and peace in a turbulent country. Great builder of cities, new Temple in Jerusalem, which was described as “most beautiful”. Very generous – remitted taxes in time of difficulties, such as the famine in 25BC – he melted down gold plate to buy corn for the starving. But one terrible weakness – insanely suspicious. Got worse with age. Feared he would be ousted from throne. His court was full of spies. Early in reign he slew the whole Sanhedrin, the Jewish Counsel, except for two. Later he did the same to 300 court officers. A specialist in murder, he promptly eliminated every supposed rival. Murdered his own mother-in-law Alexandra, one of his wives Marianne (he had 10 wives altogether, including 9 at one time). Murdered three of his sons, Antipater,

Aristobulus and Alexander (last two by strangulation). Also his brother-in-law Aristobulus, the High Priest. The Roman Emperor Augustus, of Luke 2, said it was “safer to be Herod’s pig than his son”.

Herod had a warped nature. When he was 70 and knew the end was near, he imprisoned the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem in Jericho, and left orders that they were all to be killed the moment he died. Said no one would mourn his death, but determined some tears should be shed at his death. (This was actually not carried out.)

Obviously the news of a new king was a great worry. His rival must be eliminated. The idea that he wanted the wise men to bring him news that he may go and worship was absolute nonsense. It was an excuse to murder the infant Jesus. Must get rid of rivals at all costs. Murder of young children later was indication of his real aim.

Here is the first reaction to Christ. A man, not utterly bad, had some good points, efficient at his job, generous, religious, self-sacrificing. But he could not tolerate a rival. Infant Jesus, the Messiah, was sure to threaten his life, power, place and influence. This is one of the commonest reasons for rejecting Christ. Often those who reject claim it is on grounds of the thorny problem of suffering, or because of problem of religion and science. But the real problem is that their life would be disturbed if they took Christ seriously. Free salvation is an awful insult, a blow to self-respect, for they do not want to be obliged to anyone. Then, to be under Christ’s Lordship henceforth? Repentance – give up sins? Profound change? Surrender control to another? Why would they want to do that? And what would friends say?

The challenge comes – to leave sins and go to heaven, or cleave to sins and go to hell. This was the challenge to John Bunyan. Herod chose the latter course.

Neutral response – indifference

From the king we turn to look at the religious aristocracy. Hierarchy of theological leaders. When asked, they were able to tell Herod that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem – they knew their Bible, had read Micah’s prophecy. Geographically and factually correct. Then, having given the correct answer, they went on with their job – conducting temple ritual, theological discussions, legal decisions – as if nothing else mattered. Having given the right answer about Christ, they simply ignored him. No practical importance or significance to them. Irrelevant to their world.

Would have expected theological experts to be the first to Bethlehem. But no, the first were shepherds, followed by a few strangers from a distant land. Despite their knowledge and insight, they did not love Him. Neither did they hate Him. He meant nothing to them. They just carried on with life as though nothing had happened. They chose the middle course, remained neutral – though in reality, they were against Him.

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him (John 1:10-11). Some ignored Him, some hated Him – though in practice it meant the same thing.

It happens every day. There are those men who are like the chief priests and scribes, handling holy things, writing about them, but completely indifferent to the person of Christ in a personal way. No response, trust or obedience. Old proverb – “The nearer

the Church, the further from God". Those nearest Christian privileges are often those who neglect them the most. There are New Testament scholars, very erudite about the Gospels, know all about the manuscripts, the authors, dates, sources, detailed knowledge of differences between the four accounts, differences in style, knowledge of the various opinions held down the ages – but who lack that essential personal saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It can happen in the Christian home. A child can be taught from the earliest age, taken to church, Sunday School, various meetings, learn to quote verses of Scripture, prayed for, pleaded with – but make no profession, or take it very casually. Only goes through the motions. Keeps it all at arm's length.

Contrast this with someone else who can be very hostile, from a very nominal background. Goes on into middle years in ignorance and sin, then suddenly sees the truth – and what zeal they show, what enthusiasm, prayerfulness, concern, what lengths they will go to in service and sacrifice.

Early training, Bible knowledge, Christian family background – all very important, tremendous privilege nowadays, but as far as getting to the heart of the matter – only a personal knowledge and surrender to Christ really matters. May know the Word, but may yet perish. Knowledge in the head is useless unless grace in the heart.

At the end of the day, neutrality to Christ and hostility to Christ lead to the same end. Both lead to a lost eternity. To decide not to decide is to decide against.

Positive response – adoring worship

Now we get to the Wise Men. Said to be from the East μάγοι – originally from Persia. Skilled in philosophy, medicine, science, interpretation of dreams. Like many others, they studied the stars intensely to try to foretell the future. Also believed every man's destiny was determined by the star under which he was born.

Various speculations about the star in the sky which they saw. Was it Halley's Comet which, in 11BC, was visible shooting across the sky brilliantly? Was it to do with the conjunction of Saturn (which was interpreted as Palestine) and Jupiter (which stood for world ruler) in 7BC? Between 5BC and 2BC, on the first day of Egyptian month Mesari, Sirius the dog star rose at sunrise and shone with great brilliance. Mesari means "birth of a Prince", therefore this star meant "birth of a great king". Was this the star?

Or perhaps it was simply a miraculous appearance of a new star to guide the wise men, seen to be of great significance, and they connected it with the birth of the King of the Jews (Probably heard of Jewish hopes from Jews living in the East). N.B. at this time, in many countries there was widespread expectation of the coming of a king.

So they set off. Amazing persistence and determination to see new king heralded by the star. Travelled hundreds of miles. No doubt some thought they were fools. Travelled across deserts, encountered hostile tribes, broad rivers, danger, peril and inconvenience. Possibly took months, if not years. No encouragement from Jewish

religious leaders. But determined to see Christ. Set their hearts on getting to him, and nothing would stop them.

Picture of amazing persistence. Never seen Christ, never seen his miracles, or heard his teaching, or watched his example, nor witnessed signs of His greatness and deity. Knew nothing of God's grace revealed in Him. Only just born, only an infant on His mother's knee. But determined to see Him. Not satisfied till actually set eyes on Him.

Then, having found Him, gave Him costliest treasures as He lay in the arms of poor peasant woman. What determination, love and persistence. No better example in whole of Bible. Yet we have 1000fold more evidence than the wise men, but where is such persistent and earnest seeking now? God is still the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). **You shall seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart** (Jeremiah 29:13).

Conclusion

If you are not a Christian, how earnestly have you searched? As much time and effort as preparing for examination, getting job, acquiring money, preparing for a holiday? And this matter is infinitely more important. Not just life and death matter but eternal life and eternal death matter. Suppose Christ is God manifest in the flesh, and that He did offer His life as an atonement for sin. Holy Spirit can work in heart and life and impart life into soul. After death – judgement. Eternal hell and eternal heaven. Your supreme business in life is to find out if these things are true or not. If they are not, the sooner you find out, the better, and put heart at rest and banish nagging worry. If they are true, the sooner you get saved the better. Most important thing in the world.

If Christ is alive and can be known and experienced, supreme business of life to possess Him as soon as possible. He is the pearl of great price. But only a fool is indifferent and careless and casual about matters of such potential significance. This is either the greatest truth or the biggest hoax of all time.

If you are uncertain, but genuinely seeking to understand, read and reread John's Gospel. The answer to doubt is facts. John gives facts. Expose yourself to them, but not in a cold detached way. Seek God's help "Show me yourself as I read, and if you do, I promise to respond and obey". God will give light to those willing to obey. If willing to respond, will be aware of presence of real living person, showing Himself to be utterly trustworthy. He calls you to trust yourself to Him, and follow Him to the end. He requires allegiance, and not just admiration.