**Stowe Parish Church : January 2nd 2022**

**Visitors from the East**

I am sure you will have received a Christmas Card with wise men visiting Mary, Joseph and Jesus bringing gifts.

But the passage we heard this morning from Matthew really needs one of those warnings you get on certain TV programmes ,

“This story contains material some listeners may find distressing.”

We see a family having to escape from a paranoid and brutal ruler fleeing to another country for safety. To become refugees in a foreign land - not that different from what we see all too often today.

They were fleeing from an atrocity, boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area being killed on the orders of Herod who felt his position of power was being threatened. This was not out of character for Herod: he had already had a wife and three sons murdered plus numerous advisors who he saw as threats.

So what caused Herod to be so threatened and react in such a violent way? Matthew tells us visitors came from the East to Jerusalem. They arrived with a devastating question.

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews. We saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship Him“

This shook Herod when he heard they were going round Jerusalem seeking an answer to this question

Herod quickly gathered his advisors to seek information about the birth of this King or Messiah. His advisors referred to the prophet Micah who had prophesied a ruler would be born in Bethlehem, this was seen as a prophesy relating to the Messiah. The establishment of Bethlehem as the location of Jesus’ birth is crucial to Matthew not only because of its prophetic significance as in Micah but also it served a key theme for Matthew in writing his gospel, that of Jesus as King : Bethlehem, of course, being the city of David the King.

So Herod met with these visitors and directed them to Bethlehem but asked that they tell him where they find the child so he could also go and worship him. This desire to worship the child was nothing but a smokescreen to cloak his murderous intentions towards Jesus.

But the visitors do not return having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Presumably sensing Herod’s desire to worship this child was a devious way of finding the child and making sure he was no threat. So they leave in another direction. Herod is furious and springs into action ordering the killing of boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

So let us rewind this story to the beginning and see what took place before this awful atrocity happened.

We are told Magi came from the East having seen a star they interpreted as pointing to the birth of someone special.

The Magi were astrologers, though astrology and magic were often entwined. It seems however they were aware of the Jewish hope for a Messiah, a new King, maybe even aware of some of the prophecies. This King could herald a kingdom of peace and new hope. For them such a new King warranted this journey especially as the star they had seen was for them confirmation they should make the journey. So they travelled to Jerusalem which they might have assumed is where such a new King would be born.

There has been much debate about where the Magi travelled from and I am indebted to Kenneth Bailey in his book “Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes “for his making the case for southern Arabia where frankincense was a unique product. Having said that I am not sure where they started their journey from really matters. What is perhaps more relevant is seeing Gentiles being drawn to the birth of Jesus.

Scholars also debate the nature of this star, was it some natural phenomena or a supernatural light. Whichever the key thing again is it led these Gentile Eastern visitors to Bethlehem to worship this new born child. For Matthew this is important as a star was already associated with the coming Messiah

An ancient prophecy recorded in the book of Numbers says

“A star will come out of Judah. A scepter will rise out of Israel.

It was originally thought it related to the great Jewish King , David, but by Matthews time it was identified as a prophecy relating to the forthcoming Messiah.

When the visitors arrived in Bethlehem they worshipped Jesus and presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. All these gifts were associated with royalty which is important for Matthew. His gospel has been called the “Royal Gospel” because of his focus on Jesus as King. It was later that the church associated gold with Jesus as King, frankincense with Jesus as Priest and myrrh foreshadowing His death.

The presentation of these gifts reflects the Isaiah prophecy we read this morning, in verse 6 of our passage

“And all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord “

So what then follows, namely the atrocity described by Matthew, is in sharp contrast to the usual way the Christmas story is presented each year. Matthew challenges us to link the Christmas story with the cross as the gift of myrrh also does. A mindless atrocity took place at the birth of Jesus. We see the ugly face of evil as innocent children are killed because the child Jesus threatened Herod’s power and authority and at the end of Jesus’ life we see this ugly face again as innocent Jesus is falsely accused and crucified by those threatened by Him. Matthew presents pictures of the evil in the world that Jesus stepped into to bring hope, healing and salvation. As we look around our broken world today with it terrible injustice , misuse of power and atrocities we can ponder that if the gospel can flourish in a world that produced the slaughter of those children and nail Jesus to the cross it can flourish even in the darkest places of our broken world today

And how appropriate is that wonderful and uplifting opening to the Isaiah 60 passage. Does this not speak prophetically into the birth of Jesus and the world he entered?

“Arise shine your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you

See darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples

But the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn”

Those Gentile visitors led by the star, along with those humble Jewish shepherds, being led to and meeting Jesus the light of the world.

But that took place in the context of the dark world that that child had come to redeem.

As John puts in the first chapter of His gospel

“In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it “

So what can we take from this story as move into a very uncertain 2022 .

As I reflected on this passage I reflected on the two sides of this story

Firstly we saw the Magi offering the gifts they had brought for the new King and we saw how the gifts were entirely appropriate for this child in Bethlehem .I reflected on what do we have to offer to Jesus as we look forward to 2022. One carol reminds us;

What can I give him poor as I am

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb

If I were a wise man

I would do my part

Yet what can I give him – give my heart

We should give Jesus our heart: to commit to loving and following him more, fixing our eyes on Jesus each day. But I also thought about what Jesus would like us to offer as a result of walking closer to Him. For example giving the gift of our love and kindness to our friends, family and those God puts on our path : to give the gift of our help to those who are hurting and lonely: to give the gift of forgiveness to those who have hurt us: to give the gift compassion and welcome to those at the margins, the stranger, the refugee .

W do live in that broken world but if we each try to live as lights giving gifts of this kind, each small offering will be used by God to bring about a more joyous and meaningful 2022

Secondly Matthew as well as capturing the moving story of wise men travelling with hope to kneel at the side of the Jesus contrasts this with the gruesome actions of Herod. Although it told of hatred and innocent suffering Herod failed to frustrate God’s plan of salvation. Herod’s wickedness succeeded only in leaving for us a dramatic demonstration of the radical nature of evil, the ubiquitous presence of suffering and the eventual triumph of God’s will.

Even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are conscious of the grief and hurts of the world. As someone once put it “In one ear we hear the angels singing in glorious praise; in the other ear we hear the people weeping in bitter agony”.   
In the midst of suffering Jesus Christ was born : Emmanuel, God is with us : From the very beginning our Lord was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He knew the sorrows of people. He went about doing good. He cast out demons. He healed the sick and comforted the grieving.  
And Jesus also wept. When faced with the death of a dear friend, when surveying the rebellious city of Jerusalem when kneeling in Gethsemane, He wept. Jesus knew the troubles of this world

So as go into 2022 we can have the assurance that God’s plan of salvation will never be thwarted and the savior we follow knows all about the broken world we live in. But praise God His world will be redeemed

“Look God’s dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them .They will be His people and God himself will be with them and be their god. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes .There will be no more death or mourning or crying

or pain for the old order of thing has passed away has passed away”

So we can travel into 2022 with hope in our heart, eyes fixed on Jesus our saviour and King and a desire in our hearts to shine as lights in the world God loves so much and Jesus came to redeem. Amen