

SPEAKER: Good morning.

AUDIENCE: Good morning.

SPEAKER: I'm very happy to be here with you today. Very happy to hear this wonderful choir singing this morning. A special treat for all of us, I think. I particularly appreciate [INAUDIBLE] as well. [INAUDIBLE] years ago. A wonderful choice for this morning. We got to [INAUDIBLE]. A [INAUDIBLE] that has many residences, many traditions, and [INAUDIBLE]. The 12th day of Christmas in the Eastern churches. The day they celebrate the baptism of the poor.

But truly, for most of us, is this image of the three kings. The wisemen, the Magi, coming to worship the baby. When I was a child growing up in New York City, I remember that we'd always have a Christmas tree. As New York Catholics did. A little Christmas [INAUDIBLE] set up. But the three wisemen [INAUDIBLE] white [INAUDIBLE] would be kept somewhere else in the house. And over the 12 Days of Christmas, each day we would move the wisemen a little bit closer to the crib until finally on January 6 they did appear there with the baby and Mary and Joseph. The shepherds and angels and so on.

And sometimes I think we instinctively see, reading Luke and Matthew together, that this is the scene of harmony. So many nativity displays that you see around the city and in various churches have the shepherds, the angels above and the wisemen who would have their camels present on the scene. And it all fits together. It's a really beautiful scene. The light of Christ [INAUDIBLE] Bethlehem under the star of Bethlehem. The light that has been proclaimed to the shepherds first.

Now to all people. People come from everywhere represented by these three strange figures from the East have come to see and worship the child. And this is all very beautiful. But of course, if we read the text more closely, which, of course, being a professor [INAUDIBLE] that's what I do for a living, I suppose. If we read these texts more closely, we realize that there's quite the difference between the account we hear in Luke and Matthew. And much of what we hear in Luke really sets the scene for Christmas as we usually celebrate the peace, the harmony, the beauty, the silent night, the angels, the shepherds, a scene of peace that draws us in. That we too can come and see the child.

But if you take a look at [INAUDIBLE] put Luke aside, you realize that Matthew is quite different, and on a first level, rather disturbing and indeed confusing. The previous chapter one of Matthew's Gospel ends with Joseph trying to figure out what to do. He knows that his wife to be is with child, and he knows that he is not the father of the child. The only intervention by an angel in a dream, tells him to take Mary into his house. And then in the normal, off-hand manner, Matthew ends the chapter by saying, and the child was born in Bethlehem. No fanfare and beauty, nothing.

And then chapter two begins, which you heard this morning, and it begins on kind of an ominous note, because we have the time of King Herod. And by tradition and by the things we

read, we know that Herod was a corrupt king. Herod was a ruthless king. Herod was a king who was in cooperation, collaboration with the Romans. He was not a friend of his own people. He was there for his own sake and would do anything that he could to keep power.

I think in some ways, Matthew is reminding us from the start, this was not a beautiful scene in some ideal world, but the real world crashes in. Joseph was uncertain, and now you see this king moving in on to the scene. And as you know, it gets worse. Herod, when he hears the good news that a child has been born, he is annoyed. All of Jerusalem ends in an uproar. And the people are wondering, where this is king? And of course the incident that Herod has, is let me find the baby and kill the baby. I don't want any rivals. And I think Matthew kind of throws this in our face and says, Christmas was not an ideal scene in an ideal world, but Christmas was in the real world, where power hates the light, where power hates the truth, and power want to push it to the side. And that's where we are coming to tomorrow.

We're taking Magi, [INAUDIBLE]. The three kings, is an old tradition, the wise men is the one that we often use as a way of talking about these three mysterious figures from the East, but the Magi are something like what we might call astrologers, or readers of the stars. They're magicians, in a way. They're these people from the East who come with their own priesthood, their own way of reading nature, and for some reason that is really unfathomable to us, they're interested in learning about this child that was born in Bethlehem, the future King of Israel. And this is really the beginning of what is a long history, all the way down to the present, of Christ meeting people of different cultures, different nations, different traditions, different spiritual practices, different religions. That suddenly these three figures come in, again there's no mention of shepherds, or angels or anything.

These three people come in to meet Jesus, and they come according to their own lives, their own way of reading the stars, their own tradition. And I think Matthew is saying, don't predict who will come to Christ. Don't predict what it's about, and don't predict how they will find their way. Of course in a sense they failed, because they come as far as Jerusalem, and then they realise they don't have a clue who the baby actually is. If you've ever been out on a starry night facing the city or town and you can actually still see the stars, you can take a look at that star up there, is that right above this spot, or that spot, or is it 27 miles away? How do you read the stars and bring that spirituality and religion and reading nature to this place and this time? And like anyone else who lives with their head in the clouds, who lives above and is looking up at something wise and something wonderful, suddenly they realize their feet or on the earth, they've done their long journey and they have to start asking around, where is the child?

And perhaps what they're saying, they are finding that people don't even know this child. The Scribes and the Pharisees, and leaders of the people had the holy books, they know very well that the child should be born in Bethlehem, but as with so many [INAUDIBLE] time the great promises, they will come true, but some time in the future. We didn't seriously think they would come true here or now, it will be later, some other time.

And finally, the word gets around that three strangers have come, and they're looking to find out where the new born king is. And Herod calls them in secretly, apparently so that he doesn't want to be embarrassed in public by what they might say. And he sends them on their way saying, you find the child and then I'll [INAUDIBLE]. He lies to them, of course. I want to and worship, actually I would come to kill him.

And the wise men still have no real clue who he is, so they go and they find Bethlehem. And of course, there is no mention in Matthew's Gospel of a manger or a crib in the stable. But they have to ask around again, with feet on the ground, and humble, with humility being there around people saying, is there a new born child? And of course, there are always new born children, and finally they find their way to this particular place.

And I think what Matthew does at this point to say, they suddenly realize that they found what they were looking for. They come to this room, this house and stable, [INAUDIBLE] where they see that the light they have been following from the East, the star is shining over this little house, over this mother and her baby. And as the Greek says, they rejoice with a great joy, they are filled with joy, because everything they have been seeking, everything they have been longing for, has finally come true. Their journey has not been in vain. They're asking around has not been useless. Then suddenly they have found their way and they are here.

Now this would be a beautiful ending to the text. They could say enough, we have another [INAUDIBLE] of the story, but we know and then Matthew kind of throws it in our face, immediately after this, the dreams start again. The three wise men, the three magi, get a message from an angel saying, don't go back to Jerusalem. Don't go back to see Herod. Get out of here as soon as you can. A kind of unromantic leaving for the three wise men, [INAUDIBLE].

An unwise and unhappy way to go, get out of town before you get caught. And then another dream comes to Joseph yet again, it says to Joseph, not now with the wife and you feel everything is wonderful, but take the child and his mother, and flee. Get out of here before you get killed. And they become refugees right at the start. Their baby is barely born, they are pushed out of their house, they are made to flee to a foreign country where they don't speak the language, simply because they wouldn't be able to survive.

And what does Herod do? As we know the terrible sequel that follows in this Gospel, he doesn't know which child it is, so he says, let's kill them all. All the boys under two years old, let's kill them all. It's the most violent scene in the New Testament. And Matthew deliberately puts it here at the birth of the child. So by the time we go through this, [INAUDIBLE] 12th day of Christmas, we have a very different feel for the reading we have in Luke, this kind of confusion, the shadowy dark power, these Magi astrologers from the East, getting lost and finding their way, at the end of the scene they flee and they're exiles.

And I think in a way Matthew is telling us, be comforted, the world you live in, is no worse than this world. And we can look at the world we live in now in 2019 and say well we too have corrupt rulers, we too have people who cling to the power. We too have rulers who care not for

the people [INAUDIBLE]. You can look at our country and across the globe, rulers who don't care about their own people, the main thing is lives, money, the main thing is to hold on to the power.

And we have people of all kinds of religions, around us and among us today, seeking after some kind of light. And that may have made sense in the earliest Christian church, we are of Jewish origin, we are the Jewish people, we are the children of Abraham and Sarah, and [INAUDIBLE] clear that we would recognize the light, ah, but then suddenly astrologers from a foreign country, speaking a foreign language, reading the stars in a way that Christians don't, suddenly are the ones who find the child first.

We can be confused by the pluralism around us, we can be confused about the darkness around us, we can say that none of this is possible, and the cynics among us, the cynics in the hearts of each of us, can say look what happens, there is no true Christmas, there is no romantic scene, it ends up in darkness and violence and people fleeing, and children are being killed, and people hiding to save their lives. But I think what Matthew is telling us, even with all of that, even if you are not following Luke's account of the Gospel, even if you are living in this utterly [INAUDIBLE] world of 2019, with [INAUDIBLE] you can still be like the Magi.

They saw the star, and they rejoiced with great joy. They made it to the house, they found the mother and her child, and they knew. Without any sign on the wall, [INAUDIBLE] this is the child, this is the mother we have been seeking. And they don't just look, they throw themselves down on the ground, they prostrate themselves, they fall flat on the ground and worship this child. Nothing about Herod, nothing about the confusion, nothing about the danger to come, prevents them from worshipping at this moment. And then they get to the gifts. And for reasons we will never understand, [INAUDIBLE] they give this newborn baby gold, frankincense and myrrh. But they brought these gifts all in the way from their homeland and say, this is what we have to give.

And I think the point for us in 2019, is that we should not be entirely distracted, we should not be entirely overwhelmed by the cynicism, the darkness, the violence and hopelessness in the world around us. [INAUDIBLE] to say that in the darkness we too can enjoy this and seek the light. We too can go to the mother and child. We too, if we dare, can throw ourselves flat and worship the newborn Christ. And then look and say, what is it I have to give? I give the gifts that I have. I give the gifts that I brought, this is what I have for the newborn Christ.

I suppose the beautiful final touch if I leave aside all the violence that follows, is that these three Magi, by their own route, again finding their own way, went home by another way to where they had come from. Matthew doesn't demand that they stay with Christ. Doesn't demand that they convert and become Jews or later on Christians, doesn't even ask anything more from them, except to say out of your tradition, out of your background, out of your faith, out of your way of reading the stars, you came, you saw, you rejoiced, you worshipped, you gave your gifts, now go home. Don't be afraid to go home. Go back where you came from.

And I think Matthew has despite all the things around us [INAUDIBLE], an ultimate confidence, that if we are seekers, if we follow the stars, as we follow the stars, if we find our way to Christ, then don't worry about how to formalize that, how to institutionalize it, [INAUDIBLE] need this or that. But give your gifts and then return home. And I think and believe, these three Magi were unlike any other Magi in the East, because having seen Christ, having seen the light, they return from where they had come from.

So as we go deeper in 2019, and the weeks to come, as we look at the news, as we look at the media, and we have our problems in our immediate lives, let us try to remember that Matthew is saying two things to us. On the one side, the world is never really a safe, beautiful place. The world is always dangerous, the world is always on edge, there are always people in trouble. But don't freak out, don't let that distract you, because if you follow your star, if you follow your intuition, you put your feet on the ground and ask for help, you can find a way to Christ, you will see, you will rejoice, you will give your gifts, and then once again, you can go home.