

Jon High. 14th Dec 2008.

What's so wise about following a star?

Swansea council Welsh translation department "I am not in the office at the moment. Please send any work to be translated."

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."

Matthew 2 v 1 - 2 (ESV)

The word used for 'wise men' here refers to people who watched stars, interpreted dreams, and studied hard.

Who do you think is a wise man? your parents? your teachers? Richard Branson's "Elders" - Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan, Jimmy Carter, Aun San Suu Kyi...

The reason that they're described as 'wise men' wasn't what they did day to day, it's because they followed the star to Jesus. Which poses a question - what's so wise about following a star?

The star was a sign

Road sign quiz - Zebra Crossing, Level crossing without barrier or gate, End of controlled parking zone, no motor vehicles, no vehicles carrying explosives, slow-moving or stationary works vehicle blocking a traffic lane, pass on the left.

Regular road signs do two things - tell you which way to go, and how far away it is. If you wanted to go to London, you'd probably join the M6 clockwise, and follow the signs. There's nothing particularly pretty about road signs. You wouldn't, for instance, go to Spaghetti Junction just to marvel at the instructions of how to join the A38M Aston Expressway. In fact, if you wanted to drive past the Expressway, the sign would be useless to you - you wouldn't even pay it any attention. No-one is that interested in road signs, they're boring, not particularly pretty and wholly functional. No-one's interested in them until they want instructions on where to go, then they're useful.

All a sign does is point the way.

Show us a sign

In Jesus time, people asked him to prove who he was by giving them a sign:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

Matthew 12 v 38 (ESV)

By the time people were asking Jesus for a sign, he'd already healed a Leper, the Centurion's paralysed servant, gone on to heal 'many people', calmed a storm, cast out demons, healed blindness, a man unable to speak and raised someone from the dead. Then some people came to him and said 'give us a sign'. What were they expecting?..

[The message of salvation] was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Hebrews 2 v 3 - 4 (ESV)

The amazing things that Jesus did were not just for show, and Jesus didn't perform miracles to draw attention to himself. The things Jesus did were a sign that the message he had was from God; that he was sent from God. I know people who have prayed for the sick and seen them get well. The people who did the praying, though, aren't special. They're not worth walking a hundred of miles to meet, they don't have anything particularly special to say, except for this - God used them. God's activity in New Testament times, and God's activity today in changing lives is amazing in itself, but it's still only a sign. And all signs do is point the way.

Where are you going?

The point about signs is this - they mark points on a journey, but it's not the sign that's important, it's the destination.

Put another way - consider a menu. Menus are the things we read when we go to a restaurant and decide what we want to eat. I was reading a menu recently for Katz's Deli in New York - I plan to go and visit there next year. If I showed you the Katz's deli menu, though, it'd be a bit boring. Menus are a bit rubbish if you don't get to eat the food that they describe. What's the point of looking at pictures of food, and reading descriptions of carefully prepared dishes if you don't get to eat anything?!

Just like menus are useless without getting some food at the end, a sign is useless unless you're trying to reach a destination.

The wise men followed the star because they recognised it was a sign. It pointed the way. It would have had to have been very bright for them to follow it, but they knew from their studies that it was important, and that it signalled that someone very important had been born.

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."

Matthew 2 v 1 - 2 (ESV)

The wise men weren't called wise because they followed a star - they were wise because they used it to get to Jesus. They weren't considered wise because they made a long journey from the East, they were wise because at the end of it they worshipped Jesus.

Looking for Jesus

The time before Christmas is probably the busiest time of the year. With all the presents to choose, buy and wrap, the food to buy, cook and eat, decorations to find, put up, take down,

Copyright The Crown Church Trust.

mend, put back up again and then take down, cards to find and forget to write until too late and then quickly spend an evening the day before last post trying to write messages to long lost Aunts. For most of people Christmas is all about presents, Christmas trees, baubles, turkey, pigs in blankets, Brussels sprouts, chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Rudolph, carols, family, holidays, snow, the Vicar of Dibley Christmas special, the Queen's message, Band Aid, Wham!, Christmas jumpers, mince pies, brandy butter....

There's so much going on that we miss the point. If Jesus was just another baby, the whole thing is a bit of a fuss. But he wasn't just another baby.

The bible tells us that there was nothing that we could do to get ourselves right with God. He's so perfect, and we are so imperfect that the distance between us and him was too far for us to cross. We were, and are, unable to find God by ourselves. If you told me that I couldn't see my family any more because of their rebellion against me, you can guarantee that I'd do anything to be with them again - and that's how God feels about you. He was so desperate to know you, so heartbroken at the thought of not being with you he did the only thing possible to bridge the gap between you and him - he stepped down from his throne, where he was worshipped and adored every second of every day by thousands upon thousands, rightly declaring his greatness, he gave it up and became a helpless, screaming baby, totally dependant upon his parents, his creation, so that we could come to know him, and be loved by him, and become dependant upon him again. This was no ordinary baby; this was Emmanuel - God with us.

There's nothing wrong necessarily with the things that we enjoy at Christmastime (even though some of them will make you a bit fat). The thing is though, most of this stuff - the carols, the Christmas plays, the stars in the sky, they're only signs. They point to something bigger, something better. They don't in themselves really matter that much. What matters is what they point to, what matters is the bit of Christmas that most of us are too busy to stop and think about. What matters is the baby.