**Feast of the Epiphany**

You will have heard the story of the three wise men umpteen times! You will know bits of it by heart. For certain you have heard so many addresses about the gifts - the gold and frankincense and myrrh. It's become part of the ritual at Christmas. The wise men appear on Christmas cards. They are favourites for dressing up in school plays. Young and old, we all enjoy the story. But it's so easy to let it slide
 into a fairy story. So easy to overlook the reality of it. So this morning let me help you to take a peep behind the scenes.

Who were the Wise Men, and where did they come from?
If you look at a map of the Middle East and find the area between the river Tigris and the Euphrates, that is what used to be Babylonia. It's quite a big area covering most of modern Iraq and Iran. Being between rivers it was always a fertile land. People were wealthy, they were educated, and, being traders, they were great travellers.
Babylon was a fine city. It was rich in magnificent buildings, libraries, and what we now call universities.
In particular it was famous for its astronomers, medical men, and mathematicians. They are the fore-runners of our modern scientists. They observed the positions of stars and planets, and the daily changes in the solar system. They tried to relate them to things that happened here on earth.
These people were not charlatans writing "What the stars foretell", like columnists in some newspapers today. They had no connection with magic and that sort of thing. Rather, they were from the scholarly part of society in Babylon in the years before our Lord.

What about their religion? Did they believe in God?
We have to remember that Babylon had existed for 2000 years before Jesus was born. It was the capital of three or four empires and had imported all kinds of religious beliefs
We know that the Jews and their faith were well regarded. In particular, the Jewish prophets were respected, and especially their prophecies about the Messiah. These fascinated the Magi, the Wise Men, and moved them to link that prophecy to the bright star in the western sky.
So they set out with their camel train to explore what was happening. How many of them? Scripture doesn't tell us. The 19th century carol says there were three, but most probably there would be a much bigger number for a cultural expedition. It would be well organised.
That's what it really was. A far cry from fairy tale!

I notice how civilised and courteous they were. They made their way across hundreds of miles of fertile land, then desert, and into Judea. But they didn't go immediately to Bethlehem. They paid their respects to grumpy old King Herod in Jerusalem and then went on to Bethlehem.
They quickly rumbled Herod who said he would like to visit this important infant, whose birth had brought them so far.
But when they had given their gifts, we're told they gave Herod the slip because of his evil intentions and went home another way. It seems they were as good at politics as they were at mathematics and astronomy.

I've tried to give you a sketch of these lovely characters who are part of the Christmas story, but I ought to tell you why Matthew wrote them into his gospel.
There has always been a tendency to think that people of earlier generations were not as clever as we are.
We tend to think of them as men and women with rudimentary skills, not much brain, and limited in what they could do. That is just not true. Their generations were probably almost as advanced as ours - though their interests and ways of doing things may have been very different. Matthew admired them.
I hope very much we do. They were real people. Living in a real world. Asking the same questions we ask today.
They were indeed wise men. Very wise men. They were looking for Jesus. They found Him ... and understood.
The good news of Jesus is for everyone of whatever race, country, colour, or creed.

Are you a wise man or woman? Have you looked for Jesus and found Him? It is never too late to set out on that journey and find Him.