

SUNDAY SCHOOL 29 November 2020: A plan for everyone (Matthew 2:1-12)

Christmas is all about surprises isn't it? We wonder what we shall find in our Christmas stockings or in the wrapped presents under the Christmas tree. Some families hide charms or money in the Christmas pudding and people wonder if they will be fortunate and find one as they eat.

Our lessons this term have shown us that Christmas has always been a time of surprises. It is full of God's surprises. The Jews knew that God was going to send a special messenger, the Messiah, but they didn't realise how God was actually going to work. God surprised them by sending a baby to a young unmarried woman whose family tree contained some questionable characters and some non-Jews! This was not what they had expected!

And the story of God's surprises goes on. God arranged that Caesar (Emperor of the Roman Empire) in Rome which was over 2000 kms away made an announcement, saying that the details of every family in the whole Empire must be recorded so that he could know how much tax to charge them. Running an empire was expensive, and he needed money! Caesar also decided – at least he thought he decided though we know God actually arranged things – that the best way to do this registration was to insist that everyone must report to the chief town from which their family came.

I am sure the people muttered and moaned. This non-lockdown would mess up their plans! But they had no choice. Mary had probably hoped to have her baby in her home town with her family and friends there to help her. But she and Joseph had to travel 145 kms (from here to beyond Hermanus) to be counted. It was a long hard journey (up and down hills) and probably took them more than a week. It was a dangerous too as there were lions and bears and bandits at some places. But God was directing this. Over 400 years earlier one of the prophets had been told to announce that God's king would be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) and this was how God fulfilled that prophecy.

But God had yet another surprise in store. The news about the birth of a king was broadcast to lands far away from Bethlehem. Although there were no telephones, no emails, no WhatsApp, people worked out that a special baby was about to be born.

Who got the message? We don't know their names but we know that they were astrologers, scientists who watched the stars night in and night out. (Perhaps you have been on holiday in the country where there are no street lights? If so, you may have noticed the stars. Imagine, then, how amazing they must have been in the days when there were no street lights, no light pollution anywhere!) People studied the stars and believed that they held clues about life here on earth.

We don't even know exactly what star they saw. (Some suggest it was Halley's comet but the recorded dates of its appearance don't fit. It is more probable that the planets of Jupiter and Saturn were very close and shone brightly. In those days Jupiter was regarded as the kingly planet and Saturn was the Jewish planet. So the astrologers would realise the message was about a Jewish king.)) But It could have been a totally new star which God sent specially – a surprise!

This star intrigued the wise men so much that they decided to travel to see this prince. There is so much we don't know about them. We don't actually know how many of them came (we think 3 because there were 3 gifts); whether they travelled together or whether they met en route; how

they travelled, (camels?). We only know what Mary knew – and she was probably too busy with her baby and too shy to ask these wealthy travellers anything.

We know they got side tracked from following the star and went to Jerusalem where they asked to see the baby. King Herod was shocked – he didn't want a prince. He wanted to continue to be king. But the scholars read the Scriptures and announced that they must go to Bethlehem.

Their visit reassures us that the new king wasn't going to be the ruler of Jews only; he was to be king of the whole world. How wonderful – if it wasn't for their visit, we might have wondered if Jesus was our king too. But he is!

Readings:

Monday: Luke 2:1-3 Caesar calls for registration

Tuesday: Luke 2: 4-6 Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem

Wednesday: 1 Samuel 17:12-15 Bethlehem was King David's home town

Thursday: Matthew 2:1-6 The Wise men see a star

Friday: Micah 5:2 Why the wise men went to Bethlehem