

Sermon Wesley Box Hill 4 January 2026

LIVING IN THE LIGHT – Matthew 2: 1-12

Greetings once again in the precious name of our Lord Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Middle Eastern nation of Iran is often in the news - sadly for more bad rather than good news. This week there have been large scale protests across Iran protesting against the current oppressive Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran (or Persia) is a major power in the Middle East. Iran is involved in supporting their fellow Shia Muslims in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and have long backed the Hezbollah organisation as a major force in Lebanon against neighbouring Israel. The Iranian regime is intensely opposed to the state of Israel and supportive of the Hamas organisation in the sad and ongoing tragedy in Gaza.

Such conduct is not a new thing for Iran. Various Iranian rulers have figured prominently across the Middle East region for over 3,000 years. One such ruler was the man known as Cyrus the Great who successfully extended his kingdom across most of what we today called the Middle East. Much of his success came by allowing conquered smaller kingdoms to maintain their existing set up while submitting to the rule of Cyrus. It was Cyrus who, according to the Bible, allowed the Jewish exiles to return home to Palestine in 539BC (after he had conquered a rival power, the Babylonians).

While today, Iran is over 90% Muslim (and nearly all of whom belong to the Shia Islamic denomination), prior to the military conquest by the Islamic Arab armies in the 7th CE, the dominant Persian religion was what is now called Zoroastrianism.

The founder of Zoroastrianism was a man called Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) was born in north east Iran. His date of birth is uncertain. There is some evidence he lived 1200-1500 BC; others think he lived later in the 6th century BC. He is regarded as a prophet by Zoroastrians.

It is said that while sharing in a ritual sacrificial ceremony he had a vision of a supreme being called Ahura Mazda (or “Wise Lord”) who was the only true God and the creator of all that exists; the source of truth, holiness, goodness, the giver of health and happiness. According to Zoroaster, human beings could freely choose to do good or evil in thoughts, words and deed; and depending on such choice, at death, people go to heaven or hell.

Zoroaster rejected blood sacrifices and the use of intoxicating drink in religious worship. In their place he advocated the use of fire and water as the key elements in worshiping the one God. Fire was seen as a symbol of light and truth. Water: the symbol of life. Many believe that the three faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been much influenced by the ancient faith of Zoroastrianism.

Given the long time spent by the Jewish exiles in Babylon, it is highly likely they would have been exposed to the beliefs and practices of their Zoroastrian neighbours.

One can definitely see many parallels in Zoroastrian and what we recognise as Christian beliefs concerning God, creation, human responsibility and eternal destiny. The ongoing

phrase used by Zoroastrians to this day to summarise their faith: “Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds” certainly resonates with our own Christian tradition.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of 2 long Persian dynasties - for about 1,000 years. However, with the rise and military success of the Arab Islamic armies in the period 633-651CE, Zoroastrianism was rapidly replaced by the new faith of Islam.

Nowadays, there are about 200,000 Zoroastrians in the world. About 60,000 live in India, where they are known as “Parsees” (or Persians). These are descendants of Persian Zoroastrians who fled Islamic persecution in Iran in the 10th CE and settled mostly around Mumbai, India. Only about 25,000 Zoroastrians still live in Iran; with other communities in the USA, Canada, UK and about 3,000 here in Australia.

Certain Zoroastrian themes have influenced cultures - including our own - to the present day. As examples: If you own a Mazda car you maybe surprised to learn that the Japanese car maker adopted the name “Mazda” with the hope that an association with the “God of Light”: (the Zoroastrian “Ahura Mazda”) would “brighten the image” of their first vehicles.

If you are a fan of the HBO series “Game of Thrones” you maybe surprised to learn that these are based on George Martin’s fantasy series “A song of ice and fire” (with the theme of the conflict between good and evil that is an essential part of Zoroastrian belief.

If you are a classical music lover, you maybe surprised to learn that Mozart’s “Magic Flute” and its theme of the pursuit of wisdom and goodness; and mention of the use of fire and water echo Zoroastrian concepts.

If you are a fan of music by British musician the late Freddie Mercury and his rock band Queen you maybe surprised to learn he was born into a Parsee/Zoroastrian family and identified as a Zoroastrian. A Zoroastrian priest conducted his funeral following his untimely death from HIV Aids.

And if you are a keen gardener and aware of what are called “Paradise Gardens” you will know that these have been much influenced from ancient times by the Zoroastrian belief in “Paradise” - heaven. These gardens can be found from Iran, across North Africa and in Spain and are places where a variety of flowers, shrubs and trees laid out and centred around a water feature seek to express the eternal Paradise in a visible earthly manner.

Why am I talking about the Zoroastrians? Simple answer is that the foreigners described in Matthew 2:1-12 that are variously called “kings”, “Magi” were more than likely a group of Zoroastrian priests from either Iran or today’s Iraq. “Magi” comes from the Persian word “Magu” - the name of a caste of Zoroastrian priests. The latter, were well known as astrologers - thinking the stars could provide human beings with helpful guidance. Matthew does not call the foreign visitors “kings”.

Later Christian tradition identified them as such most probably because of references to foreign kings in Isaiah 60:3 and Psalm 72:10,11 coming from various places to pay homage to the promised King of kings - and seen by early Christians as being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The visit by the “Magi” to honour the child Jesus as “king of the Jews” took place, not soon after his birth but probably a year or more later. This would explain the

order by the fear-driven King Herod to murder all children two years and under in Bethlehem.

While the Magi are said to have been guided by a star to Bethlehem, we are also told that God guided them via dreams on their long and complicated journey (verse 12). I suspect that the birth of Jesus and the visit by the Magi have over centuries come to be closely linked because of the conviction that Jesus was born to be the ruler/king/guide of all humankind - Jewish, Persian, Korean, Anglo Saxon Celts, Chinese, Africans, Filipinos, Arabs.

The story is also a reminder that God is active in the world in many ways to help bring people to know God as creator, sustainer, lover and friend. In Australia, one does not hear of many people being drawn to faith in God via dreams. Perhaps that is because people have every opportunity to hear about God through the presence of many people who have found God in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it maybe that people don't expect to experience God via dreams - as did the "Magi" of old.

In other countries where there are few followers of Jesus; there are regular reports of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ via dreams in which a person (believed to be Jesus invites the dreamer to believe and follow him). Sometimes, this also involves the healing of illness and the like. One place where such experiences are reported is Iran.

Until recent days, the tiny Christian minority living in Iran has been composed of people from Armenian or Assyrian ethnic background. In 1980 there were thought to be only 500 ethnic Persians and former Muslims who were Christians. In the last 40 years, at least 100,000 and some claim as many as 500,000 Persians have left their religion of birth - Islam and chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

Edward John Hopkins was a 19th century Anglican priest in the USA and he wrote the familiar hymn "We three kings of Orient are"

While Matthew's record does not specify the number of "Magi" who visited Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Hopkins goes with the number 3 - most likely because the text mentions three special and costly gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

What can we learn from the behaviour of the "Magi"?
Here are some thoughts.

1. The "Wise Ones" travelled a long distance with valuable gifts. Despite problems they remained determined to achieve an important goal in their lives. I suggest that to deal well with what life brings us we too need definite goals and a determined attitude.

2. The "Wise Ones" accepted Jesus as their "king" and expressed that reality by their gifts to him. Likewise, we too are to accept Jesus as "king" - the one who we freely choose to follow and give our best as an expression of our love for his love for us.

3. The "Wise Ones" through their gift of "frankincense" - used since ancient times when people were seeking God's presence and help in their lives - points to the need for all who would follow in the footsteps of the "Magi" - to make prayer to God a vital part of everyday living.

4. The “Wise Ones” through their gift of “myrrh” were expecting Jesus in his later life to know much opposition, hostility and violence at the hands of those who rejected his message of love, justice, joy and peace. Likewise, all who seek to follow Jesus’ way will know hardship and difficulty from those who want nothing to do with Jesus in their lives.

5. Our hymn writer, Edward Hopkins wraps up his composition with the reminder that the young Jesus whom the “Magi” of old worshiped as “king”/ruler; would later die but then rise again to rule over all in justice and love. With this in mind, we are invited to seek to follow the “perfect light”: Jesus the one who declared himself to be the “light of the world” and as John writes “the darkness will never overcome” that divine light.

Robert Humphreys - Epiphany of Christ Sunday - 2026.