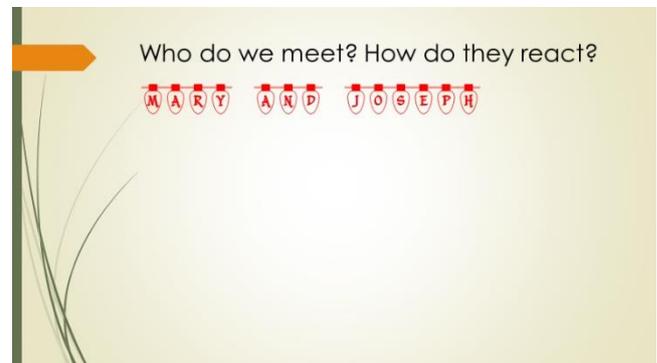
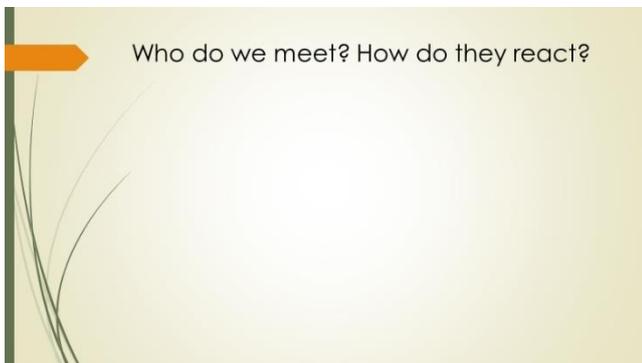


Sometimes an unexpected event happens in our life. How we respond tells us a lot about ourselves. We're all pretty familiar with the Christmas story now, having heard it dozens of times, but the events of the first Christmas were certainly totally unexpected to most of the people involved in it.

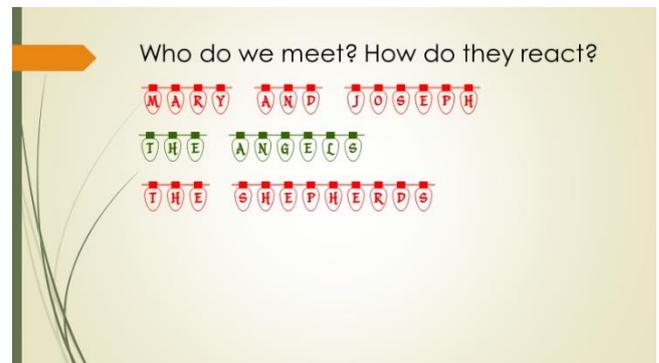
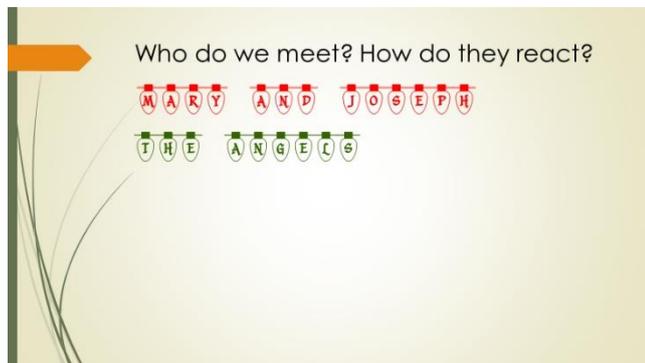


We're going to look at the main people involved and how they reacted to what was going on about them. How did everyone respond to what God was doing and saying?

Two Gospels give us details about the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew tells us what happened from Joseph's perspective and Luke tells us about what Mary did and thought. Matthew chapters 1 and 2 doesn't describe Jesus' actual birth but it points us back to the OT to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew 1:22 is a regular 'fulfilment formula' in that Gospel.

Mary is a young teenager and is engaged to be married to a nice bloke called Joseph. Strange things had happened in Mary's family recently. A cousin who was quite old had got pregnant even though she had had no children previously. Elizabeth's husband was a priest and he had become mute for several months. Mary had been visited by a real angel called Gabriel (not an imaginary one like you see in films). Luke 1:29 says she was greatly troubled. It's a strong Greek verb: diatarasso. Very perplexed. Tarasso is stirred up or troubled, whilst 'dia' is a prefix which means through and through, to the limit, acutely. She was all at sea. She didn't know what was going on! However, after having a conversation with Gabriel, she was able to say in verse 38 (Living Bible): "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever he wants. May everything you said come true." It was a traumatic experience but she gave a good response to God.

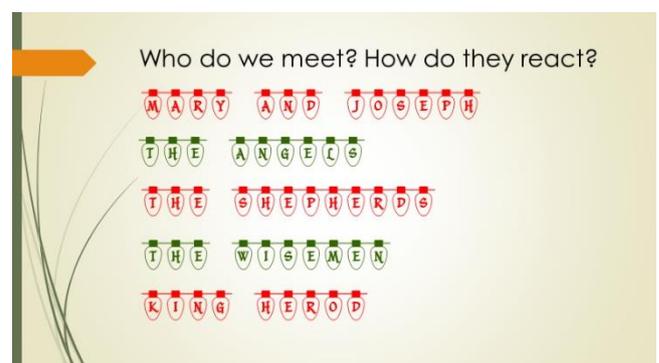
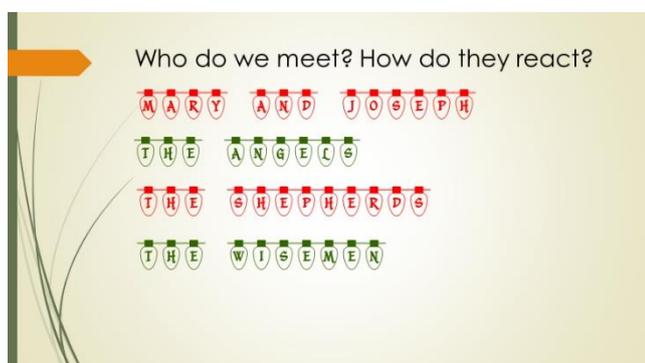
Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, but he didn't divorce her as he could have done. An angel appeared to him in a dream and explained what was going on. He stood by Mary. His heart was following God. He gave a good response to what God was doing.



I'm a curious person. How did the Angels feel when they were told that they were going to announce Jesus' birth? Who wrote the song? How long did they practice for? Who was chosen to speak to the shepherds? Was it Gabriel who was the angel who spoke to Mary a few months earlier? He had also spoken to Zechariah (John the Baptist's father) a few months before that.

The angels were excited about what they were singing about and declaring. They gave a good response to God's leading.

Shepherds were a despised group of people in Jewish society. God thought them important enough to make them one of the first people to know of the birth. Mary had one angel visit her and Joseph had a dream about one angel, but the shepherds got "plethos" – a multitude, a myriad, a great company. Plethos is from 'pletho' which means "to be full." Was the sky full of angels? Was one angel meant to go alone, but then thousands of other angels couldn't help but join in with what was going on. The shepherds dropped everything and went to visit where Jesus was. They might have been with the sheep overnight as it was spring and lambing season. They ignored what they were getting paid for and went in search of a Baby. That seems really daft, but they gave a good response to what was going on.



The wise men are described in Matthew. The word Magi is used by Matthew, but what are they? Kings? Wise men? Astrologers? Astronomers? Priests? How many were there? There were three gifts, but the number of Magi isn't stipulated, perhaps there was a dozen or more? They came from the East, maybe Mesopotamia, which is Iraq. It wouldn't have been a short journey. Perhaps two weeks or so travelling on their camels or horses following the star at night. They were foreigners and not part of

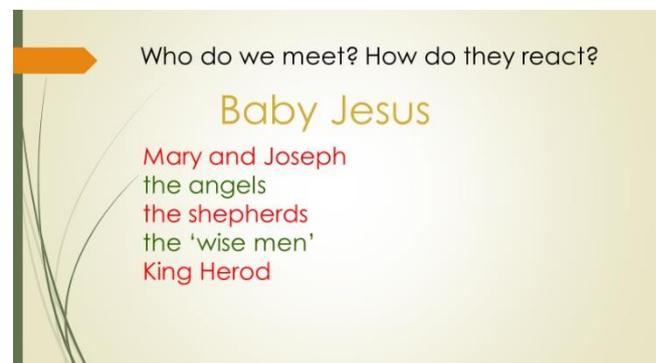
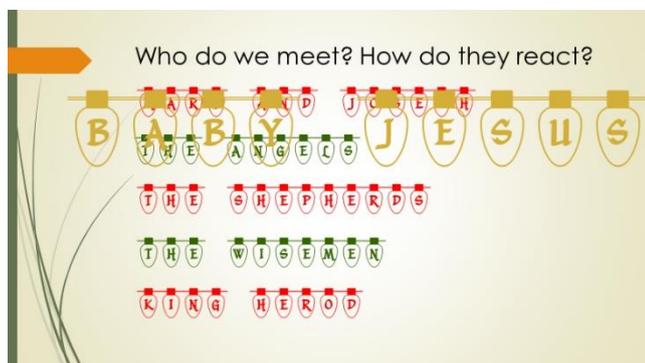
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24<sup>th</sup> December 2017 – Talk 33

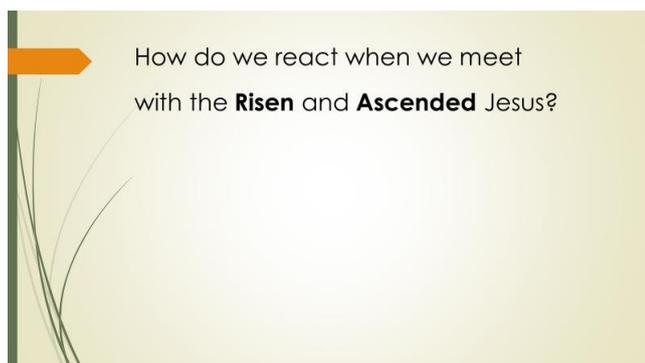
It's Tomorrow!

God's family, but still felt God's call to travel and seek the 'king of the Jews.' God talked to them through a dream after they had visited Jesus who was now probably a toddler. Remember God had talked to Joseph through a dream before Jesus was born. These people didn't really know God, but they heard God speak to them and obeyed Him. We can pray that God will increasingly speak to people we know through dreams over the coming months. We can be ready to interpret any dreams they tell us about! The Magi had taken an arduous journey because they had seen a star. The wisdom in their heads initiated a long search. Perhaps the emptiness in their hearts made them carry on until they had found true Wisdom and Peace? In Matthew 2:11 they bowed, worshipped and gave gifts. "Proskuneo," is the Greek word here for "worshipped" which means to kiss towards. They probably fell upon their knees and touched the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence. Their response to God was incredible. They'd journeyed a long way and so were tired, had met the deranged king Herod, but they still gave their all in worship, despite not being in God's family.

King Herod died around 4BC after having reigned for nearly 40 years. Some people call him 'Herod the Great' but his character didn't give him this title. He was scared of being usurped and even killed members of his family to protect himself in the future. When the Magi came to him, he was alarmed that another King had been born. The men from the East would probably have had a large entourage with them, that would have made this fragile king alarmed anyway! Matthew 2:3 says he was disturbed or terrified or troubled. The Greek word is from the verb "tarasso" [almost like Mary] which means to put in *motion* (to agitate back-and-forth, shake to-and-fro); (figuratively) to set in motion what *needs to remain still* (at ease); to "trouble" ("agitate"), causing inner perplexity (emotional agitation) from getting *too stirred up inside* ("upset"). He wanted Jesus dead and even ordered that innocent young children in Bethlehem should be murdered. He would have been furious that the Magi didn't return to him to say where Jesus was. He gave a terrible response to what God was doing at that time.



All of these people gave a response to what God had said to them. Mostly they were good!



How do we react when we meet with the **Risen** and **Ascended** Jesus?



How do we react when we meet with the **Risen** and **Ascended** Jesus?



How do we respond to the Lord Jesus ourselves today? When He speaks do we listen? He's not a crying baby in a stinky stable in a small town anymore. Do we treat Him like He is though? Do we treat Jesus like He needs us more than we need Him? Jesus is no longer a Baby. He is risen, ascended, exalted.

Two fairly important things happened to me this week.

Both of these events were expected in December, though neither were totally certain. One had a precise date and the other was "towards the end of the year." I've been looking forward to both events for quite a while.



Good things can happen unexpectedly. The shepherds had no time to prepare for the shockingly brilliant news they heard. They had to get on with walking and then worshipping. The wise men had more time to prepare, as did Mary and Joseph. Sometimes life can bring happy shocks and sometimes shocks that bring despair for a long time.



Often several people will contact me in January and ask how long would it take to learn how to play the piano! Need to be proactive when learning a new skill. Listen to what the teacher says and go for it!

In 2018 we need to be proactive in following God. We can't just let things happen by chance. We can't just hope that the Christian friends around us will keep us going. Our response to God must be one of surrender. Obedience to God must be a top priority in our lives. It is time to dedicate ourselves to God and His ways again. The diagram is based on 2 Chronicles 7:14.

**Discipleship in 2018?**

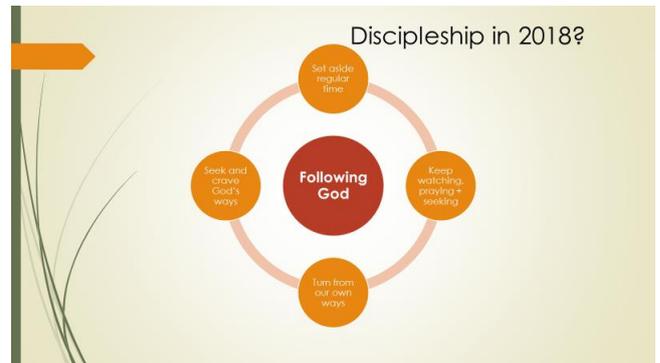
**2 Chronicles 7:14**  
 If My people, who are called by My name, shall humble themselves, pray, seek, crave, and require of necessity My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land. [Amplified]

If I ever shut off the supply of rain from the skies or order the locusts to eat the crops or send a plague on my people, and my people, my God-defined people, respond by humbling themselves, praying, seeking my presence, and turning their backs on their wicked lives, I'll be there ready for you: I'll listen from heaven, forgive their sins, and restore their land to health. [The Message]

If my people, who belong to me, humble themselves, pray, seek to please me, and repudiate their sinful practices, then I will respond from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land. [New English Translation]

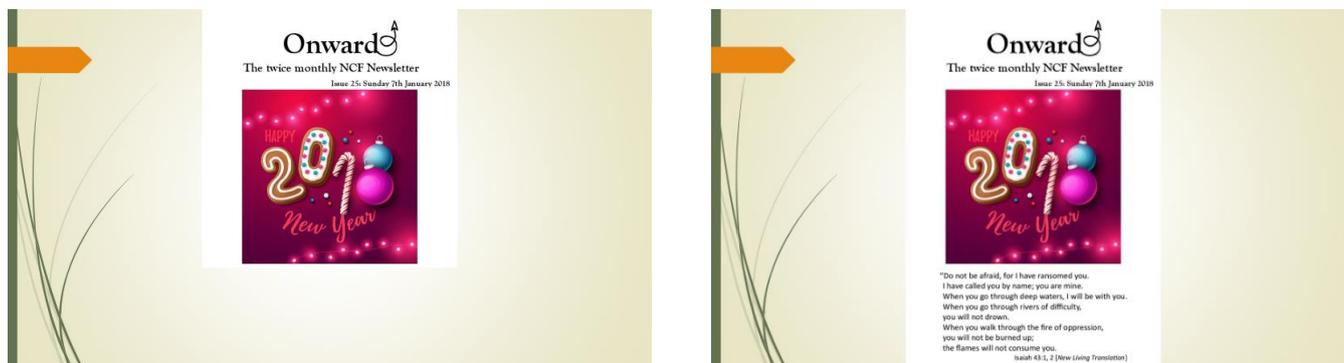
If My people who are called by My name put away their pride and pray, and look for My face, and turn from their sinful ways, then I will hear from heaven. I will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. [New Living Version]

and My people (who are known by My name) humbly pray, follow My commandments, and abandon any actions or thoughts that might lead to further sinning, then I shall hear their prayers from My house in heaven, I shall forgive their sins, and I shall save their land from the disasters. [The Voice]



It is presuming that we *aren't* putting God first in our lives – we *are* living sinful and wicked lives.

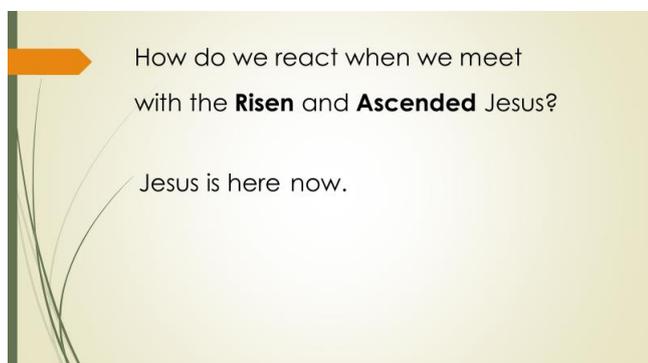
We might see far away physical things a little clearer, but it doesn't help us see into the future. We don't even know what tomorrow will definitely be like, though we all have plans – even many pagans celebrate Christmas!



Happy 2018 and yet the Scripture doesn't seem to fit. They seem diametrically opposed to each other.

Every year, we all have good moments and we all have bad times, sometimes *really* bad times. As we follow God wholeheartedly, then problems don't disappear. Tragic things may happen to some of us this coming year, but are we willing to dedicate our lives to God completely no matter what our personal circumstances?

2018 could be a year of significance for NCF. It will certainly be a year of continued change. God is Sovereign and He could make us grow in depth and in numbers even if we're apathetic and only give a couple of hours on a Sunday and occasionally a bit of time during the week. Reading lots of church history, that is rare.



Just as the shepherds, the wise men and Mary and Joseph all responded to the news of Baby Jesus, so now we must respond to the Risen and Ascended and Exalted Jesus. How shall we do that?

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.