



**Isaiah 60.1-6**  
**Matthew 2.1-12**  
**5<sup>th</sup> January 2020 Epiphany**

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**Journeys to Faith**

The Friday before Christmas is said to be the busiest day to travel.

Two years ago Gatwick airport was closed because of drones, this last year travellers were delayed and frustrated because the heavy rains of December caused flooding on the M23.

Many of us make difficult and demanding journeys at the year's end and beginning. We do it because we are drawn to the people we love and putting an hour or two on the journey seems worth it when we reach their home, the door opens and we are greeted with a broad smile of welcome.

In his poem, *Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot speaks of the rough and arduous journey of the Wise Men to Bethlehem. A long trek with an ambiguous destination, yet a journey undertaken with some compulsion.

Here's how one of them describes it:

'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
And the camels galled, sore-footed,  
refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted leaving  
The summer palaces on slopes, the  
terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.'

We have gotten used to these Kings bearing both their extravagant and poignant gifts that perhaps we fail to be shocked anymore by their inclusion in this very Jewish story.

We have gotten used to these Kings and perhaps we fail to marvel at their audacious juxtaposition alongside the shepherds as our actors last month donned both crowns and tea towels at the nativity play.

So, on this Epiphany Sunday let's try to suspend our over familiarity with the Magi

for a moment and appreciate afresh their part in the narrative of the Incarnation.

I suspect the first point worth noting about them is simply the contrast they make with the shepherds.

On a demographic scale these groups occupied opposite ends. Shepherds were fundamental functionaries to Israel's economy yet excluded from temple worship because such work made their hands dirty – ceremonially unclean. That makes Christ's description of himself as the 'Good Shepherd' wonderfully empathetic to faithful keepers of flocks on the hillsides of just about every Jewish village.

But the Wise Men – well they were in a league all their own. We know it's pretty difficult to define the word Magi – almost certainly this group of people were from Persia which is modern day Iran. They were probably respected academics, and philosophers. We like to think of them as thoughtful people who pondered life and its meaning. And part of being educated in those far off days is that you became rather good at stargazing. The patterns in the night sky gave pointers about the universe.

My grandfather, I think unsuccessfully, tried to encourage me into astronomy. Whenever I stayed with my grandparents he lent me his binoculars and gave me books on the stars so I could stand for what seemed like hours in their garden looking up into the night sky. I remember that feeling, perhaps for the first time, of sensing that we on earth are part of something so, so much bigger as I just glimpsed from my grandparent's back garden the vastness of space.

The folksy bit about them arriving on camels, the wise men that is, not my grandparents! is stitched together somewhat from the Isaiah passage we read this morning. Indeed some scholars would say their whole inclusion in the story is something of a myth – that is to say it's part of the Midrash tradition of Jewish literature. That's a rabbinic way of interpreting a text like Isaiah and embroidering it with dialogue and stories as it's placed into a contemporary context. The purpose of Midrash isn't to be a news reporter but a storyteller conveying deep and significant truth.

And the truth behind the wise men myth – proclaimed by Matthew, who writes his gospel primarily for Jews, is that God's love, expressed towards us in Jesus Christ, is for all. It's for shepherds and kings, for Jews and Gentiles – for either end of the demographic spectrum and anyone else in between.

There is, it seems to me, a wonderfully refreshing and frank lack of nuance by Matthew as he makes this point. He just plunges straight in and shocks his synagogue going, torah expert readers with the story of these 'outsiders' – these Persian academics – being amongst the first to acknowledge the infant Christ as Messiah. Maybe it offended some, confused others, and it certainly made everyone sit up and listen.

God seems to habitually surprise us – he’s bigger than our expectations, blows apart our prejudices and even has the impertinence to question our well thought out theology.

Surely one of the most precious lessons we can all take from the story of Epiphany is that God’s gift is for both shepherds and kings, for insiders and outsiders, in fact it’s for everyone. In the words of a modern hymn: all are welcome...

The second comment I would make about this story we’re pondering on the first Sunday of 2020 is just to acknowledge that God shines his light in his way – not necessarily in our’s. That means eastern star-gazers; probably adherents to another faith tradition get the message of Jesus just as clearly as those orthodox shepherds who had certificates from Synagogue school hanging on their walls back home.

But these wise men were anything but orthodox in their beliefs.

However, being spiritual and being orthodox isn’t always the same thing. Sometimes it’s those who think outside the box who seem to understand God the most.

God’s light shines where it will.

We all get surprises about the way God works.

In my first church I had the privilege of baptising many teenagers who had come to faith through the youth group. On asking them why they wanted Believer’s Baptism almost none of them said it was as a result of the sermons I’d preached – what a surprise! - but because of the positive influence on their lives of friends, youth leaders or family.

God’s light shines where it will – when it will.

We in the church hold precious truths. This revealed truth – which is really the foundation of the reformed theology a church like ours professes – is something we hold dear and long to pass on to succeeding generations.

And yet... the story of the Wise Men reminds us to nurture respect for peoples of other faiths and none. That longing for the spiritual is clearly heard as our Muslim friends are called to prayer from a minaret. That longing for peace is clearly seen in the way you’d be welcomed with a meal at any Sikh Gurdwara. That longing to be in touch with something other than the material in life is clearly experienced in the meditation of a Buddhist practitioner.

The starting place for inter-faith dialogue is surely that of respect for neighbour – and the belief that God’s light shines where it will – even upon wise men who came to Christ because, as well as reading the scriptures they also studied the stars.

And now a final thought for this first Sunday of a New Year – aren’t we just inspired by these kings – by their journey after truth.

They seem utterly drawn.

I seem to be in a reflective mood today, drawing some illustrations from other churches in which I’ve served and here’s a final one. From my time in Kettering as a very junior minister.

There was this young man who told me his first visit to us was at the previous year’s carol service. He said: as I mingled anonymously in the congregation and as I sang those carols I felt I had met with truth.

Wasn’t that a great thing to say. I felt I had met with truth.

That’s the testimony left by these determined visitors from the east – having opened themselves up to the possibility of truth they now pursued it with great tenacity.

2020 stretches out before us. What sort of faith journey could it be for you? Just a year to stand still or a year to move forward? A year to settle for the obvious or one to explore fresh ways of thinking, praying and being.

The story of Epiphany is that of following a star – following God’s light wherever it leads us - into truth – and on the journey developing and growing our skills of discernment.

Maybe today you’ve come to church feeling the struggle of a New Year because the future seems like a dark and difficult place. Well maybe you can be encouraged by these wise men – that God’s light will pierce your darkness and bring you hope and joy in unexpected places.

Follow the star, find the light and kneel at the foot of the crib knowing you have found love incarnate and the wisdom of the ages.

May that be your journey this New Year, in the name of God, who leads us all by the starlight of his love into tomorrow. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2019*