**John 1.1-9** p.79 **Matthew 2.1-12**p.1

**5th January 2025**

**Hearing Wisdom**

*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word.
Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

Last year I just about managed to go twelve months with an electronic, rather than paper, diary. I was still the slowest in the room at most committees when it came to that point of deciding a date for the next meeting. Colleagues with a paper diary just turned to the appropriate page, whilst I got flustered finding the right buttons to push on my phone.

I still miss a diary someone once gave me with a quote at the bottom of the page for every day. It was like a small dose of daily wisdom, and one or two even found their way into that week’s sermon!

Most of us would like to be wiser people, and we certainly appreciate being in the company of those whose opinion and character we consider wise.

Wisdom may be hard to define, yet we know it when we find it. Sometimes we sense it comes from experience; at other times someone’s personality seems to bring words we can trust. It can be frustratingly elusive one moment, but at another a word is spoken or a plan made that brings light and clarity to the most complex context.

I suspect it’s hard for us to grasp just how important the idea of Wisdom was for our ancient Jewish cousins even though we know King Solomon was famed for his wisdom and that the Book of Proverbs is full of wise sayings.

Wisdom, *Sophia* in Greek, was usually thought of, grammatically, in the feminine form and it’s used in something of a poetic way throughout the Jewish Scriptures. It’s an attribute of God, yet it’s found in humans.

Now, today, just two Sundays on from Christmas, we meet on the eve of The Feast of The Epiphany because tomorrow, January 6th is the day when The Church remembers the visit of the Magi, our second reading today.

This is a story in which wisdom figures prominently. For the visitors described in Matthew’s gospel are often designated as Wise Men.

In reality, their identity is an enigma. Magi or Zoroastrians might be an equally fitting label and, of course by the 3rd century, they had become kings, in fact three kings each with a name. Such are the delights of myth making that every succeeding chapter gets more and more embellished.

At Epiphany we suspend our judgment as to exactly who they were, rejoicing more in the wisdom they showed in undertaking such a long and curious journey, travelling from a different land and culture in order to worship Jesus.

Yet, ironically, maybe the un-wisest thing the Wise Men ever did was to call first on King Herod.

In those far off days it was commonly believed that unusual bright stars in the night sky heralded the birth of great kings. Indeed, in AD 66 the ancients recorded such a constellation announcing the birth of Nero, and here we have an account of one proclaiming the nativity of Jesus. However, what is not so often noted is that exactly this happened in 10BC at the birth of Herod. He too had a delegation come to pay homage at his birth because of a star in the sky.

Knowing that, are we surprised at his rage and insecurity in hearing from the Wise Men that a star had now heralded the birth of a new king – maybe even his replacement? Such an unwelcome message stirred up all of Herod’s insecurities and prompted in him not the wisest, but the most foolish of emotions as jealousy and rage took hold of his life.

However, the greatest lesson from Epiphany Sunday is that the Wisdom of God is surely to be found in the inclusivity of the Wise Men within the Nativity Narratives. People from another country and culture were welcomed at this most profound moment of the story. In the words of one of the wisest hymns we ever sing: *There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.*One of the wisest understandings of what churches might look like is to cherish the idea that we might strive to be communities with flexible boundaries offering a generous welcome.

God’s Word can often come to us from the margins. It’s why our Mission Offerings this year will be so important as we hear stories from around the world from our sisters and brothers for whom life is often a challenge because they are living at the edge.

The words of that hymn keep ringing in my ears – if there is a wideness in God’s mercy then, pray God, may we always strive to be welcoming to others and open to the whisper of God, whenever, and from whoever it comes.

Now, gird your loins for the briefest of lessons in Biblical Greek this morning, because in Jewish culture there was a very strong connection between the words *Sophia* and *Logos.* Between the idea of God’s Wisdom and God’s Word. Traditionally, the people looked for wisdom especially in the words of the Torah – the first five books of what we call the Old Testament.

And then came along the New Testament and Christian theology and the idea that God’s deepest wisdom is now found in The Word made flesh, in the life and words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hence our first reading, set for today and probably read also at thousands of carol services last month. Words from the Prologue of John’s Gospel, *In the beginning was the Word, The Word was with God, and the Word was God.**The Word existed in the beginning with God.**God created everything through The Word.**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.*So, on this the first Sunday of a New Year we hear that God’s greatest wisdom is offered to us through God’s Son, Jesus, the word made flesh.

It’s true that Logos is a tough word to translate into English and that technically speaking it could be rendered as *The Self Revelation of God* but maybe we’d miss the poetry if we used that version in our carol services.

I think it’s really helpful to think of God as *The Word.* After all we often say that we *long to hear from someone.* It makes such a difference when we receive a *word* that a friend is doing well.

We *hear* God in so many different ways and it’s quite a thought that if we listen hard, we might be able to hear the wisdom of God in the months before us of 2025.

In John’s prologue, we are told *In the beginning was the Word, and the world was made through The Word.* In other words, John says, poetically, that God’s fingerprint of Father, Son and Spirit, is all over creation.

That, in ways that can indeed inspire and teach us, we might hear the wisdom of God in nature. In the rhythm of the seasons, the new beginnings of scrub plants after fire, the slowness of transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, the interconnectedness of the movements of El Nineo to the weather here in Amersham. God’s wisdom, God’s word, God’s self-revelation, to be heard in nature all around us. That’s why we are grateful to members of the Eco Church Team here at AFC for helping us to remember that. It’s one of the ways we hear God’s wisdom.

And John, then goes on to say this Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word isn’t just the Companion of God in heaven, but part of us all here on earth.

God’s self-revelation manifested in a birth, a family, a life and lived out in community. God’s wisdom made known in relationships.

On the portico at St Martin in the Fields is a block of white granite carved with a baby at the top, as in a manger, umbilical cord still attached, and inscribed on the plinth *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*There at the crossroads of Trafalgar Square on which the church stands, at the intersection of streets that lead either to parliament or theatres, where all life gathers in plenty and in need, a sculpture of a new born baby reminding us that God shares all of life with us and is alongside us whichever road we take.

Where would we be without hearing the wisdom that blesses our life through the stories of Jesus, the Word made flesh. This year we will seek to honour that Word in our worship week by week and its focus on scripture and sacrament. We want to be a community listening out for the wisdom found in Jesus.

Hearing Wisdom, in everyday nature and in everyday living, is to hear God speak. And, perhaps, listening out for God’s Wisdom, will be one of the most important tasks for all of us during the next twelve months.

And, in facing such a task, let’s never forget a really valuable gift which is all around us, the gift of each other. For it’s often the case that the wisdom of God will come into our lives through the actions and words of those around us, both inside and outside the church. In a conversation, through a greeting or found in a suggestion.

I often and delightfully sense that in Elders’ Meetings, in Life and Faith Groups, at LunchBreak or over Morning Coffee, God speaks his wisdom into our lives through someone who is walking alongside us.

Sometimes, I suspect, our society forgets where wisdom is to be found, and maybe we do too. We can look for it in all the wrong places.

Michael Portillo used to host a radio programme on the BBC entitled *Things we forgot to remember…* In those broadcasts he delved into seminal moments in history which he thought, although mostly forgotten today, still shape our life.

On this Epiphany Sunday let’s not forget where we might encounter the wisdom of God. We could hear its voice simply by looking at a sunset, we might sense its truth through meeting someone so different from us, probably not riding on a camel, but maybe from a different culture or point of view. We will have many opportunities to bump into it through friendships both found inside and outside the church, when maybe a single sentence uttered by a companion sheds God’s light upon our way.

And most of all, we rejoice to find God’s wisdom in God’s word, in the life and stories of Jesus which will once again be at the centre of our life together during the coming twelve months.

Today we stand at the threshold of a New Year, may we hear God’s Wisdom blessing the days we are about to share together in the Year of our Lord, 2025. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd January 2025*