

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY – 2 JANUARY 2021

Sermon: What's the longest and most difficult journey you've ever undertaken? Hitch-hiking round Africa? Canoeing down the Thames? Trekking across Antarctica? I once did a four-day cross-country ski trail through the Black Forest, but we did stay in comfortable Gasthof's on the way. Anyway, I bet none of you have ridden a camel for about 1200 miles across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Israel.... with only a star for navigation. That is roughly what the wise men did. It sounds an incredible journey, and I wonder how long it took – at least six months, I reckon. They are generally thought to have been philosophers, with expert knowledge of astrology, from Persia (Iran), and called Magi.

TS Eliot describes imaginatively some of the experiences of the wise men, the Magi: "A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long 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....the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly and the villages dirty and charging high prices. A hard time we had of it". When I looked on the map, it seemed likely that, starting from somewhere between Tehran and Tabriz in western Iran, they would have travelled west through northern Iraq, probably stopping at Nineveh (near Mosul), then on into northern Syria and through Raqqa, Aleppo, turning south to Hamah and Hims, stopping in Damascus and then on to Jerusalem. It sounds a roundabout route, but they had to avoid the Syrian desert. What persistence, what perseverance!

And it seems that the star, their navigation aid, was not always there. Perhaps that's why they had to call in to Herod to ask for directions (a bit like asking President Putin where to find a known human rights activist). And the star re-appeared when they got back on the right road.... which might cause you to reflect that when we turn from God to rely on our own resources, we may become blind to his guiding light.

The star appears to behave in a very odd way, leading and then stopping – is this a bit of poetic licence? But it seems that at the time of the birth of Jesus, some of the stars did indeed move in a way that seemed very unusual. The latest research by astronomical historians shows that between 3 and 2 BC, there was an extraordinary conjunction of stars which would have amazed contemporary astronomers, and led the astrologers to believe something quite spectacularly unusual was going on. What happened was that in September of 3 BC Jupiter, the largest planet in the solar system, traditionally called "Planet of Kings" came into conjunction with Regulus, a smaller star called "The Star of Kings", and the combination produced an extremely bright and dazzling light. This would be what the Magi saw at the star's "rising in the east". And then, remarkably, because of its elliptical orbit, Jupiter rounded as it were the corner, and started the next segment of its orbit – which would make it appear from earth to be going backwards. And then it changed direction again, the total effect being to make it appear to dance a ring, or a halo, around the Star of Kings. And this remarkable movement occurred in the segment of the heavens which astrologers would identify as the house or constellation of Leo – the Lion, traditionally associated with the Jewish nation or Judah (In Genesis 49:9: "Judah is like a lion"). So astrologers watching in awe would naturally say this is about a King of Kings, in the Jewish nation.

The following June, 2 BC, Jupiter had travelled on to a conjunction with Venus, the mother planet. The stars were so close that they could not be distinguished, and the combined light was extremely bright. If the Magi set out then from Iran for Bethlehem, they would arrive by December that year, when Jupiter would be in the south over Bethlehem and could appear to be stationary over the town. And you may think it remarkable that the motions of the planets were fixed when they were created – when as one hymn puts it, "Hands flung stars into space" – and yet billions of years later specific stars create a significant pattern, interpreted by those who could read it, at the exact time that God is born a human.

So, guided by the star, the Magi find the Christ child – probably by now a toddler, and part of an ordinary household in Bethlehem where presumably Joseph had found work. Was there a moment of puzzlement, even disappointment, to find just an ordinary young Galilean couple, with a lively youngster - no angels, no heavenly choirs? But, in their wisdom, the Magi did not rely on appearances or on their feelings, but trusted in the sign they had been given, and presented their gifts – gifts for royalty and divinity. Our carol interprets

them as gifts for “king and god and sacrifice” – but myrrh, an expensive and precious salve, is also a healing ointment, an antiseptic which is commonly used in Chinese and in Ayurvedic medicine, and is good for skin problems. And Jesus is the great Healer. In the NT the same Greek word, *sozo* is used for both healing and salvation, physical wholeness and spiritual wholeness. So I prefer to think of the gifts as for a king, a priest and a healer – all equally true of Jesus.

And see how Matthew has clearly set out for us the three reactions to Jesus, which will characterise his whole life, and in a sense sum up the whole Gospel. There is Herod, filled with fear and therefore violent hatred, as he sees a threat to his power and prestige. There are the chief priests, totally preoccupied with their books and the prophecies – not in the least interested in finding out whether the prophecies might be coming true. And then the Magi, foreigners from far away but responding with adoring worship. Rejection – indifference – adoration.... that’s the choice, for us and for every person.

And then, for the Magi, there’s the long journey home. Were they changed? Did they feel satisfied, with a sense of accomplishment? Did they carry a new sense of the closeness of God to each of them? The journey of exploration had become a pilgrimage...and the journey home is the most important part of the pilgrimage, because it’s the time for reflection, for meditation, absorbing all that has been seen and experienced. And it may not be comfortable: here is TS Eliot’s version: “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death but had thought they were different; this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death”.

What can we take away for our own meditation?

- If you sense God calling, don’t be afraid to follow, even if it proves a long and difficult journey, and sometimes difficult to navigate. Just persevere. And you may find that God will use your skills and your expertise, whatever field they may be in.
- Don’t rely on your feelings or expectations – you may meet the Christ child in a quite unexpected form. Have faith
 - The choice for everyone is between rejecting Jesus, ignoring him, or adoring him – make your decision
 - A retreat, or a pilgrimage, gives you time to reflect again on the stories of Christ’s birth, life and death. Make time to spend with God in quiet and meditation, however you can.

And may this New Year bring you unexpected joy and blessings, and answer your deepest prayers. Amen

Hymns: Introit: 84 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning

Gradual: 91 We three Kings of Orient are

Offertory: 83 As with gladness men of old

Communion: 89 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Recessional: 81 Lord, for the years