

Epiphany 2020

Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

Epiphany means manifestation and today The Wise Men – sometimes known as the magi – will encounter the manifestation of God in the humanity of Jesus

Matthew tells the story brilliantly - using all the echoes of scripture to point to Jesus as the fulfilment of all that was promised – and using all the wonder of nature and dreams and imagination to create a merging of 'head in the clouds but feet on the ground' understanding and interpretation of the good news of our loving and levelling God who brings his love crashing down upon us through the humble hearts and obedience of the Holy Family and the humble surrounds of a lowly and little town of Bethlehem – whose name means 'House of Bread'

There is something very special about this moment in time – for the world and for ourselves – for the world because this story – exclusive to Gospel writer Matthew – is about the converging of Jew and Gentile – signposting us to the fact that God knows no boundaries – whatsoever – when it comes to love and community and solidarity and unity – and special for us, because this story – this wondrous story about love coming down at Christmas – is our story – about us – for us – and with us in our hearts for as long as we say it is ...

The repeat telling of this story year by year helps us to go deeper into the reality of it every time – and with each telling, hopefully more and more people will get caught up and be dazzled by the star light and life light of that fully divine and fully human bundle of hope wrapped up and lying in wait in the manger – waiting to be discovered, and honoured and followed....

So what do we know about these wise men of the east?

They had been studying – astrology and ancient writings

They probably turned up – from the royal court of Babylonia, Persia - sometime after the shepherds – Matthew doesn't talk about 'the next day' – he introduces it as happening at the time of King Herod.

The word used for child isn't the same as would be used for babies - so along with the fact that Herod wanted to kill babies 2 and under – we can think that Jesus would have been about 2 years old.

In Matthew 2:5-6 the Magi quote Micah 5:2 - *"They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:*

*'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
for out of you shall come forth a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*

And this prophecy from Isaiah 60:6 speak of God in His infinite plan arranging all of it! 'Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.'

They would have also heard about Balaam's prophecy of a star that would announce the birth of a special King meant to be worshiped? (Numbers 24:17,19)

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a sceptre will rise out of Israel.

Those men followed that star – that star of hope that they had studied and prayed and pondered over - and followed -..... And we can also take heart from them....

They came from afar and drew close to the heart of it all – as we often do – we come from afar and we draw closer to the heart of it all – to the heart of welcome and love and invitation to be part of God’s love story...

And what Matthew proclaims about this event is that anyone can be a part of it – whatever side of the fence you sit on, love transcends barriers of time and distance.

It was ironic that the Jews - those who had it all laid before them in the scripture – signposted all the way - rejected the enormity of the gift and didn’t even bother to go and check it out – even the lowly shepherds were touched and stirred into action and worship, but a six mile trip from Judah to Bethlehem was too much effort for the chief priests and teachers of the law.. As the story was uncovered – verse by verse – prophecy by prophecy – their hearts remained closed to the invitation to enter into the natural wonder of the story told by the star and into the wonder and mystery of the incarnation – when God came into the world and lived as us among us to show us who we are – in him – through Jesus...

But the wise men – the Gentiles who had no underpinning of scripture to aid their scientific and imaginative plottings and ponderings – travelled miles and miles and followed their hearts and only THEN stumbled upon the scripture to support their impulses to follow the wondrous signs of nature and heart – the scripture was a validation of their years of watching and waiting – and vindication of what it means to follow intuition and heart...

And the most profound difference – is that in the final analysis – what separated the pragmatic Jews from the open-hearted Gentiles – was worship and homage. The gentiles were entering into the heart of Christianity – the heart of Christ – the anointed – and becoming part of the Good News – wanting nothing less than to bow down and bear their symbolic gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh – while the Jews were having none of it – and the doings of Herod represent that rejection and fear in the darkest way.

These wise men made an effort – came prepared full of joy as they encountered God in the face of Jesus – they bowed down and worshipped – and they returned home by another way...

They don’t stay but they leave their gifts and take away their gift of God’s love revealed on the ground and in the fire of their hearts – they return home to share their gift with others.

They saw the star – they followed – they worshipped – they knew – wise men not because of their wisdom and knowledge but because of their seeking and finding the one who is all wisdom and knowledge – love and hope in the dark ...

What a message for us today – in the dark of the pandemic and all that it has stirred up in our personal, communal and global lives....

As we go into the New Year, maybe right now in your life you are seeking direction and wisdom for a decision you have to make. Life can change courses quite suddenly sometimes and leave us feeling lost – but we can take heart and seek out the light of wisdom, comfort and strength

As we remember the beginnings of our longing to shine here where we are – let’s ask ourselves if we’ve really seen the star – are we really following the star – are we really pointing to the star to shine the way for others....

Wrecclesham Shines – the place where I am is shining – I am shining – the place where you are is shining – you are shining... Let’s try and remember every time that we see a star in the sky or in the window of our neighbours that in God’s eyes we are all stars – and the more we pray and seek to follow and bow down and honour the essence of what it means to follow the star of Bethlehem – the more the starlight will shine with us and for us and through us – so that we become embedded in that nativity story- where divinity and humanity kiss each other and infuse us with the awe and wonder of a mingling heaven and earth story and experience with Jesus at the centre – of the manger – of our hearts...

Let the words of the Lord spoken through Isaiah lift your heart with hope:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you - ...you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy;

And let the Magi be symbols to seek and listen and follow our own call to the light....

'O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.

Amen

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