

Sermon 2/01/2022 (SB)

Matthew 2: 1-12.

It's very easy when we hear certain stories in the Bible to not really listen to them, because they're so familiar. Especially the Christmas story. The angel and Mary, the birth in a stable, the shepherds and then, when it comes to Epiphany, the Magi visit Jesus. They come from a far country, they find Jesus, they offer him gifts and they go back to their own country. That's it, isn't it? Not much more to say about it: short sermon!

But I'd like to ask, "What is there in this story that I find surprising?" What questions might I ask if I had never heard this story before? I might find it surprising that the Magi set out on their journey at all. They were people who studied the stars and drew conclusions from what they found. They saw something they had never seen before. This star was new and different and they concluded that it meant that a new and important king had been born. But why not leave it at that? Why feel the need to get up and go, to find out more? They weren't Jews, although they probably had some knowledge of the Jewish scriptures and the prophecies about a Messiah. They had caught a glimpse of something that they knew was worth pursuing. And what about their return journey? Why did they not return to Herod, but go back by a different route? We are told, they were warned in a dream. It seems clear that those men were being prompted to act, by some inner conviction. Even if they were guided to Jerusalem by a star, it wasn't a star that led them home by a different route.

Of course, the star itself is another surprising thing to notice. Do stars really move around?

But there is something much more surprising and I don't know why I have heard this story many times but it has not surprised me before.

Herod calls together the chief priests and teachers of the law and he asks them where the Messiah was to be born. And without hesitation they tell him: "in Bethlehem in the land of Judah". They must have known why Herod was asking – because these strange visitors had arrived saying that a star showed that a new king had been born somewhere nearby and they have come to worship him. Herod was troubled, but so was "all Jerusalem" – everybody knew. What do these chief priests and teachers of the law do? Do they ask excited questions, do they say "we'd better go and investigate, we'll come with you"? It appears they do nothing, which seems incredible. Was it because they were too afraid of Herod? Was it because, as experts in the scriptures, they didn't believe these foreigners could have found out something they had missed? We don't know, but it just seems such a terrible missed opportunity. Something amazing was happening right under their noses and they didn't spot it.

But perhaps that was how it was meant to happen. For the Magi, this was *their* time. This was when God wanted to reveal himself especially to the Gentiles and nothing was going to prevent that, because Jesus had come for everyone. The prophecies of his birth even include mention of visitors from many nations converging on Israel, being drawn to the one who is like a light shining in the darkness, and bearing gifts of gold and frankincense. These non-Jews, the wise men as they came to be known, were there all along in God's mind and in the words he gave to the prophets. He simply led them to Jesus using the tools they were familiar with: the study of the night sky.

They were led, but it can't have been straightforward: they had to go on a long journey, they had to search. No doubt there were moments of doubt and difficulty.

There must have been nights where the clouds obscured the star and they had to wait, unsure of where to go next. That's why when they got to Bethlehem and they found it shining brightly again, we hear "They were overjoyed". This was confirmation that what they had been told in Jerusalem, was correct. That inner prompting that had caused them to get up and go, had brought them here, where they found a young child with his parents, and they bowed down in worship.

It may be a cliché, but many of us find our lives are like a journey. We set out to look for something which, like the Magi, we have caught a glimpse of, and we decide that it is worth pursuing. It may be a journey to find someone to share our life with, or the pursuit of a particular job. It may be a quest for better health and wellbeing. It may be earning enough to get out of debt, or to get a mortgage. It may be we strive to be a great artist or musician or scientist or doctor.

All things that can take a lifetime to get anywhere near. They all require persistence and single-mindedness.

As Christians we also find we are on a journey towards God. Once we have had a glimpse of him, we know that we must find out more. There are many questions along the way. It isn't easy because a lot of things distract us. We find that we start looking at the world around us in a different way. We find that we can't get very far on our own and that we need others to help us. We find out things about ourselves which are uncomfortable.

We discover that to find God, we need to follow Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. What gifts then, should we offer to Jesus? I would like to suggest, not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but our time, our attention and our love. When we give these to God we are truly worshipping.

I wish we knew what happened when the Magi got back home. All we know is, they went by another route, not via Herod. In a sense the story is left hanging in the air.

And what about us? Where will our journeys take us in 2022? It's a good time to pause and think "Where might the Holy Spirit be leading me?" As soon as we stop searching, we start to stagnate. Let's not lose our curiosity like those chief priests and teachers of the law. As soon as we stop pushing forward and growing in our faith, it may start to shrink. But God will surely guide us as he did those travellers from the East, because he *wants* us to find him. He is calling us. So let's encourage one another as we go forward together, to keep searching for Jesus, because even if it sometimes feels as if we have only caught a glimpse of him, we have an inner conviction that nowhere else will we find such great treasure.