

The Visit of the Magi...

... follow the star and find Jesus

A sermon given on Epiphany, 10th January 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Professor Tim Kelly, in the Minster.

Matthew 2:1-12.

The Magi followed the star and found the infant king and saviour Jesus.

Many experts and scholars have laboured to discover what this star may have been. For many years, people said that it was Halley's comet. However, this would have appeared in around about 12 to 11 BC, so this is probably a little bit early for the birth of Jesus. Others have thought that it could be a supernova, but perhaps the most likely explanation is that the planets Jupiter and Saturn, are known to have been in conjunction with each other three times during the year seven BC. But really, whatever the physical cause, it must have been a very clear and visible sign in the night sky. A signal so striking that the Magi, the thoughtful astronomers and astrologers that they were, sat up and took notice. Its significance to them was understood; something important was happening here on Earth. So they felt compelled to follow the star, to let it be their guide and to find out what was happening.

So the Magi followed the star and found the infant king Jesus: light leading towards light; the light in the night sky led them towards the light that had entered the world; the light that shines in the darkness. Now, we call this Sunday Epiphany, but what does that word epiphany actually mean? Of course, we may casually say to one another, "I've just had an epiphany" when really all we're saying is "I've just had a really good idea" or that some remarkable thing has occurred. But an epiphany is so much more than that,: it's a divine manifestation in the midst of human history. And that, of course, is what the Magi found: a true manifestation of the divine; in fact, God made man, God incarnate, in the middle of all of the chaos and tumult of the world. If nothing else, the words that we read before and after the Magi visiting the stable serve to remind us of the drama that they were in the middle of; how unsafe and unsure and how volatile this world now the home of the infant Jesus, actually was.

So what does this mean for us today? It may seem like a mini-lifetime ago, but we have just celebrated Christmas; like the Magi, we have already come and adored him, Jesus Christ the Lord. But I think there's a particular challenge for us as we move into this fresh

year of 2021. After the year we've had in 2020, there are, thankfully, genuine and promising signs of hope in 2021. I'm hopeful of a better year. But at the same time, it seems like there's still some of that fragility, drama and danger hanging in the air. We just have to look at the events of the last week to see that, just as it was with the story of the Magi. And just as it was with the Magi, amongst the continuing and unfolding drama around us, our challenge is to keep our eyes firmly fixed on that star, knowing as we do in the afterglow of Christmas, where that star will lead us: to the truth of God being with us; of God being alongside us in all that we face. Just as we pray sometimes in our Christmas blessing, we need the perseverance of the wise men, and the outlook of the wise men.

Archbishop Steven Cotterell in his book 'Walking Backwards Towards Christmas' imagined these words that I'm about to read, coming from one of the wise men, Caspar, 'Most people learn to look down. Not me. I would not let my horizons shift. So there are obstacles in the path? Let them trip me up; better to keep looking upwards, to chase after dreams and stumble, than only ever see the few steps in front of you and spend a lifetime going round in circles, getting nowhere fast.'

Now, in some respects, I'm a little jealous of Caspar and his two fellow travellers. Of course, they have the skills and knowledge in studying the stars, but they also perhaps had one clear advantage over us today. They could clearly see the star. In the days of the Magi, the features of the night sky were a clear and glistening sight: bright pinpricks of light against a clear black-blue sky. For us, we often have to travel some way into the countryside to get such a view. Such is the problem of our light pollution in our towns and cities.

And similarly, I'd like to suggest that today we have such a challenge in following and navigating by the stars: light pours in from other sources; other distractions have the potential to easily take us off course; we can have cloud cover; it can be hard to hold our gaze fixed and true on that one star; to stay firm on that heading amidst a world where other events cause us to look down, to look left, to look right, in fact, to look anywhere but up.

Although the light is always there, sometimes we are going to have to redouble our efforts to follow; to seek to find the star amidst the cloudy night sky; to flutter like a moth confused by the moonlight glow of a nearby light; to be distracted from the path that leads to and acknowledges Jesus as our hope, and the hope of the world.

So as we enter this new year, let our prayer be like those imagined words of Caspar:-

"Father, as I walk the path of 2021, do not let my horizon shift; as obstacles may present themselves in my path to trip me up, help me to keep looking upwards."

The Magi followed the star and found the infant king and saviour Jesus: so may we, this year in 2021.

Reading Text

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ *"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."* '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.