

The visit of the Magi ...

... a summons to be transfigured

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Epiphany, 8th January 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 2:1-12

So the twelve days of Christmas are over. At the vicarage we've just about cleared away all the lords-a-leaping and drummers-drumming and swans-a-swimming, at least until next year - so the dogs are a bit calmer. And now we find ourselves moving into the season of Epiphany. And what, I hear you ask, is the difference between Christmas and Epiphany? There is some continuity between the two, and in many churches the crib scene remains in place through Epiphany, as it does here in the Minster. The only change is that the shepherds have been replaced by the wise men. So if you are so attached to your Christmas tree that you want to keep it up until the beginning of February, then there is some liturgical justification for doing so. But there is also a big shift in emphasis from Christmas to Epiphany.

At Christmas the key message is the very comforting one that a Saviour has been born for helpless humanity. He is Emmanuel - God with us. And if Christmas represented the sum total of the Gospel, then there is a risk it could come across as being a matter of simply passively receiving God's gift as private individuals. It could easily be reduced to an individual personal religious experience offering peace of mind - 'Don't be afraid, God is with you.' And all too often when we talk about our faith, it doesn't move beyond that. It's as if Christianity is just offering a more ancient and formal structure for mindfulness techniques. But Epiphany tells us that the birth of Jesus Christ signals something much bigger than personal spirituality. Epiphany shows us that Christ is the revelation of God given for the whole world. Not just for a few, not just for the initiated. And that responding to that revelation is a vocation involving a life changing journey. So let's look at those two things more carefully.

First of all, Christ is the revelation of God given for the whole world. The wise men in the Epiphany story are not Jews. They don't know the God of the Old Testament who has promised himself to Israel. They belong to a foreign people far away to the east, probably Persia, modern day Iran, where the religion was Zoroastrianism, which involved elements of astrology and stargazing. So Christ is revealed to foreigners, to people of different race and belief. God's revelation of Himself through Christ is to those who are outside the covenant with Israel. It's universal and it's public. The Magi were drawn by the light of a new star in the heavens, which

was something anyone could see. It wasn't the result of an inner experience or the revelation of a carefully guarded secret given only to a few. Christ was revealed to all.

So when people politely decline giving God any place in their lives by saying, "Actually, I'm not religious," or words to that effect, the proper response to that is to say, "You don't have to be religious. It's not just for religious people, it's for everyone." The Magi weren't religious in the sense that the Jews would have recognised. And believe it or not, despite being a priest, I don't really think of myself as a religious person. I didn't become a Christian because I wanted to dress up in robes and attend church services, nor did I become a Christian because I'd had some dramatic private experience. I became a Christian because I became convinced that there was some truth in this story of Jesus as the Son of God. And if it was true, then it had a claim on my life - I couldn't go on ignoring it. And in the Epiphany story, the star is the sign that Christ is the light, the truth of the whole world, the desire of the nations, and that faith in him touches the whole of our lives, and not just some inner spiritual bit. And he isn't just for religious people, but for everyone trying to work out what life is for and how we're supposed to live it.

And the other thing about the Epiphany story is that the Magi, in responding to that revelation, end up going on a long journey that appears to have taken several years and caused them some inconvenience. And it's no accident that at the end of the reading, we're told that after they had worshipped the newborn king, they left for their own country by another road: they found a new way through life, something they hadn't expected. And allowing themselves to be addressed by God, they allowed their plans to be interrupted. They surrendered to a vocation, a journey whose ending they couldn't imagine. And at some level, that's true for all of us - in responding to the gift of Jesus Christ, we find ourselves embarking on a kind of pilgrimage, not necessarily a physical journey, but a vocational journey where some things have to be left behind and new things embraced, and where we recognise the importance of growing into the people God is calling us to be. A journey involving risk and adventure and faith.

Maybe one of the reasons why Christianity has been in decline for so long is because it no longer captures people's imaginations. And maybe that's because too often we domesticate it and make it too small. We're not talking about a spiritual self help programme here - the Magi could have got that at home - what we're talking about is a summons to be transfigured; a summons by something that is bigger than we are; a summons to follow Christ on an adventure that will change us and in the process will allow us to play our part in transfiguring the world around us. And responding to this summons will draw out our gifts; it will deepen our relationships; it will stir us out of our complacency; and it will renew our vision for what life is all about.

And that's something profoundly exciting.

And it's good to allow ourselves to be excited afresh as we enter for a new year, as we respond to the light given to the world at Christmas and Epiphany and as we wonder what God might have in store for you and me as we enter 2023. Happy New Year to all of you.

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.