

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 3 January 2010

(Epiphany Sunday)

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Isaiah 60 v1-6, Matthew 2 v1-12 (Our Journey of Faith)

Gold, frankincense and Myrrh - the three wise men bring their gifts to the baby, which often prompts a sermon about the gifts each of us can bring; how we can use our talents for God.

Today, let us look at the event from another aspect – the following of the star: the undertaking of a journey. The wise men were all interested in astronomy – rich and educated men who could follow their interests. They would have travelled by caravan with a retinue of servants, which would ensure their safety and relative comfort in travelling, carrying many supplies and goods, along with the three famous gifts.

How did they come to bring the gifts? As they were seeking to find the “baby born to be king of the Jews” one assumes they chose the gifts before they set out. They had studied the stars and decided to take action on the meaning they discovered.

Last Christmas BBC2 examined 5 possible scientific explanations for the star. Scientific observers of the day would follow the tracks of stars and planets which they regarded as stars. Constellations such as Aries the Ram and Pisces the Fish were believed to have meanings, and what they discovered was related to the birth of a king.

Jupiter was associated with king making, Saturn with the old king and Venus with motherhood. One theory is that Jupiter and Saturn both came close together while moving through the constellation of Pisces – Pisces represented Israel, Saturn the old king and Jupiter the new king. Similar theories link Aries the Ram (the sign for the Jews) with Jupiter.

Apparently every 8 or 9 hundred years there is a phenomena where planets, due to the earth’s rotation, appear to retrograde or go backwards for three times in a period of a few months – and there is a point where they seem to stop still before travelling forward again. (Don’t ask me to remember the technical explanation please – something to do with the earth’s movements combined with those of the planets.)

Is this what God used to bring the Magi into the picture? With their understanding of the meaning of stars and destiny, they believed strongly enough to set out on a journey of discovery; something only rich people could do. It takes conviction and effort to embark on such a long and arduous journey. They were on God’s mission – a mission

that God had called them to even if they didn't realise it or its significance themselves.

Each of us as Christians is on a journey – not obviously a long and physical journey, but a life-long journey in exploring and developing our faith. We don't travel following stars, but we do aspire to following the light of the world – Jesus! Jesus is *our* star!

So what of our individual journeys and where have we reached? The wise men had an initial belief and followed their star. They asked questions to discover the final source of their star. They humbled themselves, despite being rich men, to bow and worship the baby Jesus.

This is a pattern for us to follow. Each of us will have initially explored the faith. At some point we will have accepted the faith for ourself – it may have been internally absorbed from birth. Perhaps you were brought up in a church family and have always been to church. Maybe you considered Christianity over a period and come to commit yourself. Perhaps you had a born again experience when you suddenly felt a surge of emotion and there and then felt the Holy Spirit.

Some of us may have been drawn into the faith through the example of someone else. There may be some among us who are still looking to make the first real step on their journey.

Somewhere along the way, we become aware of the immense importance of forgiveness – that Jesus died for us and that when we genuinely confess our sins we are forgiven – we start with a clean sheet so to speak.

The Holy Spirit becomes more of a reality for us.. Communication with God through prayer and meditation becomes a larger factor in our lives.

We may well have a time of consideration and acceptance accompanied by doubts. Then belief firms up, although the occasional doubt may still surface. A constant message from the gospels is to use our talents – put our faith and loving our neighbour into action. So hopefully we commit ourselves to working for and serving God both within the church and outside in the community.

The following is a true story which I told some 5 or 6 years ago, but is worth repeating:

A West Indian woman in a London flat was told of her husband's death in a street accident. The shock of grief hit her like a blow. She sank into a corner of the sofa and sat there rigid and unhearing. For a long time her terrible tranced look continued to embarrass the family, friends and officials who came and went.

Then the school teacher of one of her children, an English woman, called and, seeing

how things were, went and sat beside her. Without a word she threw an arm around the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. The white cheek was thrust against the brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeped through to her, the newcomer's tears began to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap.

For a long time that was all that was happening. And then at last the West Indian woman started to sob. Still not a word had been spoken and after a while the visitor got up and went, leaving her contribution to help the family meet its immediate needs.

This is the embrace of God; his kiss of life expressed through the faith of the visitor, guided by the Holy Spirit. The visiting woman had a strong and active faith. Her journey through life to that point had brought her into teaching – God calling her to use her talents. Teaching brought her into contact with the son or daughter of the woman. Her faith and the call of God led her to visit the family home (she needn't have bothered). The Holy Spirit enabled her to be helpful to the grieving woman.

We all have our faith journey – committing ourselves to Jesus, listening to and hearing God through prayer and meditation. How you respond to God – to God's will for you – is yet another step. Our faith journey is never over because as humans we are not and never will be 100% perfect – but the Lord loves a good trier!

Our New Year Resolution, among others, can be to gain distance in our faith journey; not stay stuck in the same place. To try more steadfastly to follow the way of Jesus – the road of our journey – to be the person that God wishes us to be.

So, like the wise men, we *are* travelling, following our star – Jesus – the light of the world. May we be as steadfast in our belief as the wise men were in theirs!

Happy New Year!

Amen.