

Drawn to Christ

Just a week and a half ago, on Christmas Eve, I stood in this pulpit before a church that was packed to the seams and asked everyone a question. That question was, ‘why are you here?’ Looking out at the big congregation it seemed clear that there were many people there who rarely, if ever, darken the door of the church but had come on that particular evening, and while I and other regulars here were delighted to see them I still found myself curious: ‘why have you come?’ ‘What has brought you here?’ Well, this morning we are a rather smaller congregation, but this Sunday these readings from Matthew’s Gospel and Paul’s letter to the Ephesians invite us, I would suggest, to ask the same question again: ‘why are you here? What on earth brings you?’ Why on this first Sunday of a New Year would you choose to come to church?’

Take our reading from Matthew’s Gospel. This is basically a story about a group of people who embarked on a journey that brought them eventually to Jesus. As they say to King Herod in verse 2, ‘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.’ In other words when they rolled up at King Herod’s palace, alerting him – with disastrous consequences – to the birth of a rival king, if you had asked them why they came and what brought them they would have referred to the star: they saw its rising and being star gazers that prompted them to leave and to set out on this journey that brought them eventually to the Christ child. And this story therefore invites us to ask the same question. What has led us to Christ? To use the imagery of the story, what are the ‘stars’ that have led us and guided us and brought us on this strange journey that leads us, eventually, to that place where we bow before Jesus and give him our lives? Now, doubtless there are any number of ways that we could answer that question but there are three answers that I would like to consider this morning.

A first answer to the question ‘what draws us to Christ?’ might refer to other people, fellow Christians, fellow seekers, fellow pilgrims who have accompanied us and guided us on the journey. And I wonder who you might mention and name. Maybe one or both of your parents, or

maybe some speaker or writer who revealed Christ to you and made you want to follow him, or maybe a Sunday School teacher or a church congregation that you have belonged to. Something I never fail to find very moving is when we baptise a child and after having put vows to the parents, one is put to the congregation in which they promise to play their part in nurturing and growing the faith of that child and all children in their midst. And that is why it is so sad if we don't see that child again, unless they're part of another fellowship. The vow made by the congregation reminds us that the Christian life is a corporate, community endeavour. We do not follow Christ alone. We are part of the Body of Christ, the Church, the community of faith, the communion of the saints. You may know the saying, 'it takes a village to raise a child' and certainly it takes a community to raise a child in the faith. So that is the first star that leads us to Christ, the 'village of faith' and particular Christians who have influenced us.

So to the second star which leads us to Christ and this might seem surprising, but it's very important – it's what we might call the star of science. You see, what we must never forget is that these wise men, 'magi' as they were known, were really the scientists of their day. They were astrologers who investigated the heavens, concerned as they were with the inner secrets and working of the universe, and given the sad and troubled relationship between science and religion, is there not something wonderful about the fact that along with simple shepherds there came to Christ these sophisticated explorers, scientific pioneers at the interface between the known and the unknown? And it is particularly significant that this year we should consider the story of these star-gazers, drawn by a light in the night sky, for some of you may know that this year, 1915, has been designated by the United Nations the year of Light and Light-based technologies. The aim of the year is to raise awareness of the achievements of light science and its applications, and the reason for this is that 2015 marks several important light-related scientific anniversaries. So, for example 2015 is the bicentenary of the putting forward of the notion of light as a wave; and it's the 150th anniversary of the discovery by the great Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell of the electromagnetic theory of light propagation; and it's the centenary of Einstein's formulation of certain key aspects of the general theory of

relativity. And, in addition to all that and more, a total solar eclipse will occur in March and a total lunar eclipse in April. So now you know – and how wonderful to kick off the Year of Light, pondering the story of the magi who followed the star! And what a wonderful opportunity – if one were ever needed – to reconnect science and the Christian faith and to recognise science as one of the ways in which we are drawn to Christ. Let's get this straight. The New Testament talks in exalted terms of the role of Christ in creation – try getting your head around that. In that glorious, sublime passage from John's Gospel that we read over Christmas we heard John the evangelist speak of the Word who was with God before anything was made and who was God and through whom all things came into being and without whom nothing was created. And that Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. And therefore all truth and all discoveries draw us closer to him whose fingerprints are everywhere, on everything. Think of it this way - today is called Epiphany Sunday because epiphany means revelation or manifestation, and today we recall how Christ was revealed, displayed, disclosed to the wise men. But of course whenever and wherever truth is revealed there is an epiphany of Christ. Every discovery is a manifestation of the eternal, creative Word. Every scientific discovery is an epiphany, including all the light-related discoveries we celebrate this year. Scientific discovery, the praise of God and the following of Jesus – all are done with the same breath. How did we ever come to think that science and religion were enemies?

I mentioned just now James Clerk Maxwell, one of the great scientific pioneers singled out by Einstein as hugely influential in his discovery of relativity theory. Clerk Maxwell was a deeply committed Christian who was appalled at the thought that his Christian faith and his science could be divorced, and there is a beautiful passage of his writings in which he insists that there is nothing that must be left unexamined by science, for everything leads to God, the Author of Salvation. And he talks about what he calls 'the Ghosts and Bugbears' that would try to stifle truth and restrict science, and he concludes by saying, 'But a Candle is coming to drive out all Ghosts and Bugbears. Let us follow the light.' And what a great summons that is for Epiphany Sunday. It could have been said by the first wise men, those astrologers, those early scientists:

‘let us follow the light!’ And it could be said whole-heartedly by every scientist since – let us follow the light!’ And it can be said joyfully throughout this United Nations year of Light: ‘let us follow the light!’ For the light leads us to Christ!

So science goes hand in hand with the community of faith and those who have nurtured and inspired us in leading us to Jesus. One last thing however needs to be said, one other vital answer to my question on Christmas Eve, ‘why are you here?’ You are here because God has drawn you here. Think of it this way. That journey to Bethlehem undertaken by the magi: in a sense it was not undertaken at their initiative. It was not their project, their big idea. They were drawn, summoned, pulled even by something called grace. And why? Well, think for a moment of our reading from the letter to the Ephesians this morning. Paul talks there of a great mystery which is God’s plan to draw Gentiles, that is non-Jews, into his special, chosen people. This is a mystery not formerly revealed, says Paul, that ‘the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body...’ And the wise men, the magi, are of course Gentiles and therefore their journey is part of the outworking of that plan, to draw Jew and Gentile together into one family. That is why they come, drawn by the tug of God’s gracious purposes. But if we had read more of the letter to the Ephesians, especially the first chapter, we would have seen that this uniting of Jew and Gentile, is itself a part of an even bigger plan to draw everything together under Christ. Paul writes of ‘a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.’ And you and I, and our presence here this morning is all part of that plan. We have been called by Christ, we have been saved by Christ, we have been incorporated into his Body, the church – why? As part of that great divine, cosmic project to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. And that, ultimately, is why we are here - not because we have chosen to be but because God has chosen us to be; not because we decided it was good idea but because God has called us and drawn us and guided us. And that is such a reassurance when faith is tried and tested and we worry if we can even hang on in here – to know that our faith journey is not our initiative but God’s, and that we are held in the orbit of divine grace. After all, we do not know what the coming year holds. The beginning of a new year is always an apprehensive time as we

wonder what they year holds in store. What will test our faith? What will sift our faith? Will we still even want to be here this time next year? Next year will the question be not ‘why are you here?’ but ‘why are you not here?’ Well, with the magi we declare that it is by the grace of God I am here today and it is by the grace of God I will be here next year too.

These, then, are the stars that, along with the wise men, lead us to Christ and explain why we are here today: those in the Christian community that have inspired and sustained us, the wonders of the universe discovered and displayed by science, and God’s great plan to unite all things in heaven and earth. The wise men brought with them gifts and today we bring these gifts of bread and wine. Through them, mysteriously, we find ourselves further drawn by the pull of divine grace.

So come, and be drawn to Christ, present here at the table. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
eternal sovereign over time,
endlessly faithful throughout centuries and the millennia,
Creator God for whom a billion years is but the blinking of an eye,
we worship and praise you -
we whose times are in your hands,
we whose brief span of years is clasped in your embrace.

We praise you today for bringing us to the beginning of this new year, for the life and breath and strength that have brought us through the close of an old year and to the opening of a new one.

O God as we come here poised for whatever lies in the months ahead there is much that we would like to leave behind. There is much that we would prefer not take with us. There are regrets and failures and sins, and we know that they go with us into the new year because they are so much a part of us, though we wish we could slough them off and discard them.

So we acknowledge and confess these things to you, O God.

O God your Word tells us that you really do make things new. Your Word speaks of forgiveness that buries that past, and it tells of being born again, of being renewed from above. Come Holy Spirit on this first Sunday of a new year and do just that.

And give us the strength and power to rise to new life. For we pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Loving God, Lord of our faith,
we thank you today for those who have gone before us,
for those who have been our stars, leading and guiding us
and praying that we may be a help
and encouragement to others.
And we pray for our Church here in this city,

asking that it may be a light that shines
and that leads people to Jesus.

We give thanks for the magi and as we do so
we pray for all scientists, for all who seek to unlock
the secrets and mysteries of the universe.

May their knowledge and understanding contribute
to the wellbeing of the world, to the eradication of disease
and the enhancement of life for all...

And we pray today for those who travel in darkness,
for those who walk in the world's shadows.

We pray for those whose lives are condemned to poverty and hunger.
O God, let the bright star of justice and righteousness shine upon your
world...

We pray for Jerusalem, and the Holy Land, and for Palestinian and Israeli
and for the people of Gaza, and Bethlehem and the West Bank. O God
remove the causes of conflict and anger. May the bright star of peace
shine upon that land as ancient wrongs are left behind and current wrongs
are put right...

And God, bless all in our world who are victim's of today's Herods and
who suffer the corruption of power.

We pray for Rachels weeping today for her children and refusing to be
comforted – children caught up in war, children facing hunger and
undernourishment, children who are victims of adult violence and abuse.
May the bright star of your rule shine and dispel the shadows and bring
hope...

And in a moment of quiet we hold before you those of this congregation
or others we know who are in particular need of your healing and comfort
at this time...

Star of Bethlehem, light of the world shine upon us we pray.

As we pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the Morning star. Amen.

