

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

A glimpse of the end

One of the striking things about the Bible stories that we read at Christmas time is the very central place of worship in them all. When the baby Jesus is born it seems like it is a call to worship to all heaven and earth. So, for example, in Luke's Gospel we read of those shepherds who were out in the fields near Bethlehem and as they keep watch over their flocks suddenly the sky is alive with a heavenly host praising God at the top of their voices: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven...' And then off the shepherds go to find this new born king in the manger in the stable and we read next that 'The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.' More praise, more worship, as the shepherds' voices echo the song of the angels. Indeed if we had read on in Luke's Gospel we would have found the infant Jesus being brought to the temple for his dedication and we're told that an old priest there called Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. And he's followed by an elderly prophetess called Anna who witnessed Jesus' dedication and as soon as she saw the baby we're told that she began to praise God too. Clearly the primary response to the birth of the baby Jesus is praise and worship and these early chapters of Luke's Gospel resound with it.

That brings us to the story of the wise men who came from the East that we read this morning from Matthew's Gospel. And this is the rather strange thing about the story. Why were they summoned by the star? We don't know how far they travelled but it seems likely that they came from Persia, in which case it was quite some trek and it may have taken them up to 2 years, given that Herod took the precaution of killing every child under 2 years of age in an attempt to be rid of this usurper. But why did they come? After all, it must have been a long journey involving huge cost and massive disruption – and to what end? What was the point? Well, they show up at the house where the holy family are now staying and we are told in verse 11 that 'they knelt down and paid him homage', giving him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In other words they came and they worshipped - and then they left! All that way just to bow and pay homage – and then it's pack your bags, saddle up the camels and back we go all the way home. Why? This journey achieved nothing

It produced nothing. There was no output, no measurable benefit, no profit to declare, no income generated – they just came, bowed, offered and left.

Yet you could say that this was the entire goal and purpose of their lives. Nothing else could ever match this. In a sense you could say – they could say – that it was for this that they were made, it was for this that they were born. Think about it. These people are seekers after truth and wisdom. At night they scan the stars in order to probe the mysteries of the universe. They read the constellations as if they were God's graffiti, sprayed across the dark emptiness of space. They are ancient scientists and philosophers learning the deep grammar of the cosmos. They have a thirst for knowledge and understanding. And now in this child in Bethlehem they come face to face with the one to whom the stars and constellation are pointing, the secret to everything. John in his Gospel will articulate the truth of this child in his own way when he says that 'all things came into being through him, and without him nothing came into being.' Paul will express it his way when he makes the outrageous claim that 'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... and in him all things hold together.' And here these scientists, these philosophers, these seekers after truth and wisdom and understanding are coming face to face with this one – what could possibly top that? In a sense, did their lives not end there? No wonder we're told that they returned by another road. After that nothing could be the same.

What is important however is that in order to get to that place, they had to use their skills as astrologers and their crafts and their expertise. Think for a moment of the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh – whatever they may signify, surely there is a sense in which these are symbols of the wise men's God-given abilities and powers which have been pressed into the service of leading them there. The gold, the frankincense, the myrrh – surely these are symbols of all their gifts, all their resources, their scientific expertise, their skills, their years of training that have combined to bring them to that place. And now, as they bow in worship, their whole lives find their fulfilment, their end, their goal.

We could, however, and we must go further and say that what we see here is the story of the entire human race. You see, it's crucial to this passage that these wise men are not Jews, they are Gentiles. In other words they do not belong to God's special, chosen people Israel – they are citizens of the world at large. What is pictured here in this story therefore is the whole world,

represented by these wise men, coming and knocking at Jesus' door. Centuries before the prophet Isaiah, in the passage we read earlier, had foreseen the day when the whole world would be drawn to the light of God's truth shining from God's people Israel:

Arise, shine, your light has come...
nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn...'

Here is prophesied the pilgrimage of all the nations of the earth to Jerusalem, bathed as it is in the light of God. And as they come so all the wealth and riches and glories of the world are brought to the one to whom they ultimately belong: as it says, 'they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.' And that verse of course lies behind the story of the wise men, but if we were to follow it through we would find it resonating again in the final book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. In chapter 21 of that book we find pictured the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, representing God's new world that is coming, and the passage draws on those verses from Isaiah as it pictures the new Jerusalem lit by the glory of God, and the nations walking by that light and the kings of the earth bringing their splendour into it. Other translations speak of 'the wealth' or 'the glory and the honour of the nations' being brought into this city. And this is beautiful for what is depicted here are all the treasures of the world being brought into the new Jerusalem and being incorporated into the new creation. Nothing is wasted. All that is good in human history and culture, all that is glorious, all that expresses human, God-given genius and inspiration, all human creativity and innovation is brought here in homage and returned to its source. And there it finds its fulfilment and its goal and its end. And this is the journey of the human race. Humankind are like the wise men, summoned to the Christ who is the truth of everything. And like them on their journey, so we have been led astray and we have deviated from the right road for we have distorted the truth. And as will be true of this story with King Herod so our story is one of murder and violence and tyranny. But by the grace of God we will arrive at the goal and end of our journey. And we will be back once again in Bethlehem, with the wise men, led by the light of that star, and finding fulfilment and completion of all that we are in offering homage to this child.

So in this journey of the wise men we see the journey of the human race, but we also see in it the story of each one of us as individuals. What is

depicted here is true of each of us: in some way we are all being drawn to Christ. In some way the story of our lives is of a journey in which we are being drawn and pulled and guided to Christ as the moon draws the tide. And each one of us could think of the ways we have been led and guided, the people that have been influential in our pilgrimage, the events that have acted as signposts. And for most of us, like the wise men, that journey has taken us along wrong turns and led us down dead ends and we've found ourselves in the wrong place. But somehow, through it all, that star which is the light of Christ has led us, and the result is that we are here this morning. And within us is that deep stirring which continues to prompt us to Christ, and we resolve that in the coming months of 2016 we will continue on that journey and come closer to Jesus.

Here also, of course, at this table, we gather around Christ just as surely as the wise men did back there in Bethlehem. And here the bread and the wine become like the gold and frankincense and myrrh, symbols of God's gifts to each of us, all that God has made us and given us, the talents and the energies and the skills which have been bestowed upon and entrusted to us. And here they are offered back to him in humble homage, as we resolve to use them in the coming months to God's glory and honour. In so doing they – and we – find our end and our fulfilment. Amen.

Loving God, Lord of our faith and our life,
we praise you for the star of Bethlehem,
the light of Christ – leading, drawing, guiding
us to the one in whom the truth and mystery
of all things becomes flesh.

We give thanks today for the wise men, the magi,
and as we do so we pray for all scientists, for all who seek
to unlock the secrets 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 that the bright star of peace may shine
over your world today and in 2016.

Let it shine over Jerusalem and Gaza and the west Bank,
let it shine over Syria and Libya,
let it shine into every dark corner where hatred is sown
and division is nursed.

And we pray for the church of Jesus Christ,
That it will be a star that will guide people to Jesus.
Bless the life and witness of this congregation
in the coming month.
May we indeed be a place of welcome,
A community that cares for all
And that is bound together by the very special
Bond of the Holy Spirit that unites us to Christ.
Bless especially those who are sick or troubled
Or suffering from age and infirmity.
May they have a special place in our hearts.

O Jesus, shine your light in our world, in our church
and in the heart of each and every one of us
and draw us closer to you.
In your name we pray.