

Matthew 2:1-12

25.12.16 Christmas Day

The Long Journey

We do not know how far the wise men travelled to find the infant Jesus, born in Bethlehem, because we do not know exactly where they came from – only that they came from the East. Their journey has been depicted in many ways – in hymns and poems, in pictures and in stories like the one we heard earlier – but it is all pure speculation. We know so little about them and where they came from.

Our story earlier, however, was making a deeper point – that in many ways their journey was just part of a much longer one, a journey that goes far back into the mists of time, far back in the story the Bible tells. Earlier we traced that journey back centuries before Christ came, to when there stood a great temple in Jerusalem, a temple people thought could never be destroyed. But we traced the journey further back, to a time when God's people Israel wandered in the desert and were led by a pillar of cloud and of fire. And we traced the journey back further still, to the days of a flood when the earth was destroyed. And we could have traced the journey further back still, to the very dawn of creation and before, when God broke the silence of eternity and spoke all things into being. This is the long journey of which the Bible tells, the journey that God walks with his people from creation and through judgement and grace, through rejection and reconciliation, until it reaches that house in Bethlehem, and the stable, and the manger, and we join the shepherds and the wise men who joined that journey and end up where the child is born.

In all these journeys, however, the big one from creation to the crib, and the smaller ones made by the wise men and the shepherds, we see certain common features. Firstly, we see a God who made us and who wants to know us and to love us and to be known and loved by us. This is a God who wants his life to bound up with ours and will stop at nothing to make that happen, overcoming every obstacle. Then, secondly, this is a God who calls us, who reaches out to us, who draws us. Shepherds in the Bethlehem fields were summoned by angels. Wise men from the East were drawn by a star. Later in the Gospel story we will find fishermen and tax collectors and all kinds of people called by Jesus to follow. In all manner of ways, in the events of our lives and in the still moments God is calling, drawing, as the moon draws the tide. Then thirdly, somehow – and it happens in any number of different ways – we come

to Christ. For shepherds at Christ's birth it happened at a manger in a stable. For wise men it happened in a house where they came with gifts. And many of us would have a story to tell of how it happened to us, how we found our way to Jesus. And many of us are not sure if we are quite there yet and there still seems to be a bit of a journey to go and that's OK – everyone's journey is different – but something is still drawing us on.

But then the journey to Jesus leads on to another journey. We are told of the wise men that they finally reached Jesus and gave their gifts and then comes that marvellous verse: 'and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.' I love that. Having come to Christ they could not walk the same road again. Everything had changed. Their world had changed. The landscape of their lives had changed. The way they read the dark night sky had changed. They found themselves walking a new way, a new road, for they inhabited a new world.

This is the journey that the church walks. Grounded in a long journey that goes back to creation it leads by many, many roads to Christ. Some of us are at different points along that road but something – someone – is drawing us on. And then the road that leads to Christ takes us off in a different direction. It's a new path that is trod. And the task of the church is to help one another to walk it. The task of the church is to help one another to stay on it, to learn to read the signs that guide and direct is along that way. This is the church: a company of pilgrims, a rag bag of all sorts and all kinds and all ages and all at different places but united in a journey that leads to Christ - and then to newness.

On this Christmas Day remember Emmanuel, 'God with us'. God is with us on this long journey and will bring us safely to our destination. May God bless you on that journey in the year ahead. Amen.