

Journey into God

When we celebrate the Christmas story, as we have done in recent weeks, it is easy to forget that there are in fact two Christmas stories and they are somewhat different. There is one version in Luke's Gospel and one in Matthew's Gospel and they have different characters and different story-lines. On our Christmas cards and in our nativity plays we conflate the two stories and mix them up and there is no great harm in that, as long as we occasionally step back and notice the differences. And one significant difference concerns the journeys that we find in the two Gospels.

You see, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' birth involves a journey for him. We are told of a census that was taking place at that time requiring people to be registered at their ancestral home. And that meant that Joseph and Mary, and Jesus in Mary's womb, had to journey down from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem – a hazardous journey which might have taken them 10 days or more. So Jesus, carried in his mother, makes that dangerous journey and we might see here a kind of a metaphor for what we call the Incarnation, God coming to us in Jesus Christ. In that journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem we might see a picture of God in Jesus Christ leaving the security of heaven and journeying to us, 'registering' with us as a human being, signing on as a member of the human race. In Matthew's Gospel, however, there is no census and the only journey is made by the wise men to Jesus. Here we find no mention of Jesus travelling to Bethlehem – he already lives there. It's the wise men who must travel, leaving the safety and security of their home in the east and making this journey to Jesus. And here therefore we have a metaphor not of Christ coming to us, but of us coming to Christ.

Maybe that is why a journey is such a fertile image for the Christian life, the life of the disciple. Indeed that's why the pilgrimage has often been a spiritual discipline, not just in Christianity. The pilgrimage is a kind of living symbol of discipleship, reminding us that our faith is not static and fixed but is on the move. We often talk of 'faith' as involving belief in God, and we sometimes refer to people of faith as 'believers', as if faith amounts to believing certain things. And of course there are beliefs that we hold as Christians and later in our service we will confess together those beliefs in the

ancient words of the Apostles Creed. But the life of faith is much better depicted as a journey than as a set of beliefs that we sign up to. Think of those wise men. They set out with very little belief or understanding. They simply discerned that somewhere a new king had been born and the fact that this was proclaimed by the stars meant it was of global and indeed cosmic significance. And doubtless their journey led them into all kinds of adventures and encounters. Doubtless it was a journey of discovery. On the way they learnt things – for example that this king would not be born in Jerusalem as would be expected, but rather in the obscurity of Bethlehem. And that meant acknowledging error and misunderstanding and even making the blunder of alerting King Herod to this new king's birth. That is the journey of faith – discovery and error and illumination and sometimes taking wrong paths that lead to disaster. But all the time there is this sense of being drawn, of being pulled gently towards God – indeed *into* God, for this is ultimately what is happening to us: we are being drawn into communion with God.

Of course this journey is not something we do on our own. We don't know how many wise men there were: it never says there were three, only that there were three gifts, but there was evidently more than one – and faith's journey is something we do together, and we learn from one another and Christ meets with us wherever two or three are gathered together. And one of the joys of my life as a minister is those gatherings where together we plunge into the Bible and we discover different insights that come from different understanding and different experience. Whether it's Sunday worship or various fellowship gatherings or our little WhatsApp Bible Study Group or our midweek fellowship we have that sense of a little band of pilgrims journeying together into God's Word, learning from one another and being drawn more deeply into God.

This is where we actually need to combine the two nativity stories, Matthew and Luke, and we need to merge the journey God makes towards us with the journey we make towards God, for as we journey towards God we find that the God who comes to us walks alongside us. God is both the end, the destination of our journey and also our companion who accompanies us, drawing us more deeply into him.

So on this first Sunday of the new year this would be my prayer for you. I pray that in the coming year you will journey more deeply into faith, into

truth, into God and the life of God. To quote a verse from a poem by W. H. Auden:

He is the Way,
Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness,
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

So come now to the table where Christ greets us as our companion,
literally the one who breaks bread with us. And so be nourished for the journey.
Amen.