

Magi's journey / our journey

It is not uncommon to think of the life of faith as a journey, or pilgrimage, and it is this that makes the story of the wise men particularly apt one, especially as we begin a new year. As we read of these wise men who travelled from the east to Jesus we are reminded of our journey of discipleship, and we are invited to make this story ours, to read ourselves into it and to consider how we might see our journey of faith in the journey of the magi.

So we join these wise men as they set out on their travels, and the first thing we note is that this journey was not their initiative, it was not their project. Something called them, something summoned them— they were drawn to Christ. As astrologers, their task in life was to read the script that was written in the night sky. Their role was to decipher the secrets of the heavens, to interpret God's cosmic code, and in doing so they saw through their telescopes this strange star. And like the moon drawing the tide to the shore, it drew them to Jesus. Of course – tragically - their journey took a major wrong turning and they headed straight for Jerusalem and into the lair of the paranoid, brutal King Herod, alerting him to the birth of a potential rival. And that is no doubt because they presumed that this king would be born where all kings are born – in capital cities, in lush palaces. They didn't understand that this king was different. So they blundered. They made a stupid mistake – but they got to Bethlehem in the end.

Now, consider that as your journey. Think of the question that comes to my mind again and again as I come to church: what is it that has brought us here? Why are we here? Is it because we have found faith? Is it because in a society based on consumer choice we have taken this life-style option? Well, the answer is no. We are here because we have been drawn here. Our faith journey is not our initiative, it is not our project, it is not ultimately our choice. Like the wise men, we too have been drawn by a star. It is a star called grace and it pulls upon our lives, tugging gently and, like the moon, it influences and affects us in hidden and mysterious ways. And this is good news. It's good news to know that our faith is not our initiative but God's and that it doesn't all depend upon us. It's good news when our faith is weak or when we fail and take wrong turnings or make stupid mistakes as the wise men did. It's good news that God has initiated our journey of faith and that he will get us there in the end, just as he did with the wise men.

Indeed we could go much further. Our reading from the letter to the Ephesians this morning speaks in vast cosmic terms of a plan that God has, a plan for the fullness of time, a plan to gather up all things in heaven and things on earth. God's great universal purpose is to gather up all things and draw them to Christ, overcoming the fragmentation and estrangement and alienation that sin has brought. And the wise men's journey, and your journey of faith, is part of that great plan: a tiny part of the drawing of all things and uniting of all things in him. So our little faith stories are part of a far bigger, cosmic drama! And that drama ends not with my personal salvation but with all things being drawn to Christ and reconciled to God and God being all in all in a new creation, and my salvation is just a tiny part of that.

Then, however, comes the next stage of the journey: the wise men arrive, eventually, and they bow in homage to Jesus, and they offer him their gifts. And consider that too as part of your journey. Somehow, by some combination of influences, we come to that place where we bow and offer to Christ the gift of our lives. And maybe that has been a part of a long and gradual journey or maybe it came about dramatically in a moment of crisis, but somehow in a world of competing gods and lords the promptings of grace have brought to our lips the ancient Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. And to bow in homage to Jesus is an act of personal devotion that reconfigures our lives and our world.

That brings us to the third part of the story. The wise men return by another route. They cannot go back the same way for everything has changed. They are like new people for their eyes have seen the glory. In the famous words of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi*,

‘we returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.’

When we bow before Christ other gods are dethroned and the entire universe is realigned.

Only now our journey differs from the wise men’s. You see, in a sense they left Jesus behind in the house in Bethlehem when they returned. They had seen him and the path of their journey had altered, but there is no sense of Jesus travelling on with them. But of course it is different with us. In our journeying from Bethlehem Christ goes with us. He accompanies us and in a short while we will pause as he meets us round the table and refreshes us for the journey. Here is grace of which the wise men knew nothing. And as we face the promise and the threat of a New Year we know that this one goes with us, walking with us into an unknown future. 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,
to the preservation and flourishing of nature and creation
and the enhancement of life for all...

Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer.*

And we pray that the bright star of peace may shine
over your world today and in 2020.

Let it shine over Jerusalem and Gaza and the west Bank;
let it shine over the wider middle east:

especially today we pray for Iran, and for the USA
in the light of last week’s assassination.

May there be no rush to further conflict and retaliation;
may there be a lessening and not a heightening of tension.

Let the bright star of peace shine into every dark corner where hatred is sown
and division is nursed.

Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer.*

And we pray for the church of Jesus Christ,
That it will be a star that will guide

and to draw people to Jesus.

Bless the life and witness of this congregation
in the coming months.

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,
and those recently bereaved.
May they have a special place in our hearts.
Lord, in your mercy / *hear our prayer.*

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.