

The Visit of the Wise Men. Epiphany Sunday, January 5th 2020.
Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

Do any of you make jigsaws? Or used to paint by numbers? One of the things about jigsaws, esp the ones with loads of pieces, is that at the start, the whole thing, the table or whatever looks a big mess. Then over time, order may come – you may sort the pieces with blue or red or whatever into a place on your table, and of course as you fit pieces, the picture begins to come together. It all fits.

The set Church of England bible readings for this coming year, will often include Matthew as a gospel reading. And Matthew is putting together a picture about Jesus as we read his gospel. He begins with a genealogy – a list of who Jesus ancestors were – he declares and shows that Jesus was a descendent of King David and a descendent of Abraham. So Jesus was Jewish and also a true successor to King David. Then, we hear the story about Joseph – an awesome man who stands by Mary, regardless of the public disapproval, when he knows her pregnancy is all part of God's big plan – and we learn of Jesus mission – his name will be Jesus because he will save us from our sins. And we learn that this is not God's new plan – a plan B! It has always been God's plan as prophecies begin to be fulfilled.

And now the wise men story is told – and the picture continues to be built, to come together ...

So looking at our gospel. 3 main points: the continuing fulfilment of the Old Testament, journeys and responding to Jesus.

Old Testament Fulfilment.

I have said already about of the Old Testament fulfilment. When the angel spoke to Joseph, Isaiah 7 was being fulfilled; when the

magi visit, Micah 5 is fulfilled. In fact, it is possible to say even in the genealogy, the promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 etc, and to David, in 2 Samuel 7 are being strongly hinted at being fulfilled by the God of Israel in Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham.

The promises in the OT were so precious to a Jewish person and well known. The Promises were spoken at different times in Israel's past – by many different people. Yet many of those promises – prophecies – came when Israel was weak or even broken as a nation and occupied and some or most of her people were in exile. You can see such promises for example within Isaiah 40-66. Promises came when perhaps Israel was in a condition similar to Syria now. Can it be restored?

These promises are stated by God. God would rebuild Israel, its people scattered to the four winds taken away by the occupying victorious armies, would return, and the nations – the nations would bring their wealth to Jerusalem and non-Jews - Gentiles - would come and become their servants and also declare that the one true God, the only living God, was Israel's God. When Israel was occupied – men like Daniel were taken to serve foreign king, and its wealth taken away stored in cities such as Babylon.

God promises a complete reversal. Our Isaiah reading was a great example – God would no longer be angry with Israel because of its many sins, but the Lord would be near once more, and nations would come not to wage war but because of wanting to be close to Jerusalem; those children taken away will come home; and “the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba will come, they shall bring gold, frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Nations coming, to worship the living God, the God of Israel, bringing wealth.

Wise men came. They were not kings as we sing – but royal advisors, astrologers and scholars. They come – non Jews – they come to Jerusalem, they come bringing costly gifts – wealth. And when they find the infant Jesus, they don't come as tourists – and say, oh isn't that nice, he looks like his mum, they are full of joy - one translation says - they were overwhelmed with joy - they bow down and worship.

It is first fruits of fulfilment isn't it – the great final kingdom has began to break in, is starting to come near in Jesus, and the nations are coming to God, to Israel and bring their wealth. It is another piece of the picture coming together that says – this is the time, this is the real McCoy, this Jesus is the long awaited Promised One. We cannot disconnect the Old from the New. Matthew writes to people who long for these promises and believe in this promises. He shows, over his 28 chapters, this Jesus, fulfils what the Lord promised...

Journeys

So the wise men come from the east, following a star. Often when we think of East we may think, Far East like China, or India perhaps. But Gold, wealthy people of course would have. But myrrh and frankincense – this was harvested from trees that grow only in Southern Arabia. And Gold was mined also in Arabia. Justin Martyr 2nd Century Christian writer stated the wise men came from Arabia, writing in such a way suggesting it was a well accepted fact in his day. So, our Magi could well have been Arabs, or at least were from Arabia. A journey that began with a star.

What can we add to our walk with Christ? They followed the star. I'd suggest They are open to **God guiding them on the journey**. John writes: “Through the Word all things were made, without him

nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:v3). It is striking how the one through whom creation was made, part of his creation, a star, leads people to him. The magi are open to guidance – not an ordinary star – and they continue to be open to it leading them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And later, they continue to be open to that guidance of God through a dream.

We know, it is God who God guides them but through means that worked for them, but for us maybe seems strange, unexpected. Today, for some of us here, the testimonies we hear, the way God guides them may be different, not the way he guides us, but does that mean it is not from God? Is the test perhaps what direction does that guidance lead to? Is it honouring to the king. Does it bring the person closer or keep them close from wandering away? He may use common sense, but he may use the supernatural inbreaking of the Spirit, as we pray, or scripture is illuminated, or practically as doors appear to be open or closed as God incidences occur.

Guidance on the journey.

Second. **Your Journey.**

They made the journey and they ask the first question in the NT - such a good one - Where is one who is born king of the Jews. They wanted to come close and practically walked, rode the kilometres for perhaps 6 weeks or more. So a practical question. This year. How can you come closer to Jesus? What will help?

You see perhaps we may have God breaking in - as he did to the magi - but also we have a responsibility to consider at the start of this year, how can I come closer to Jesus. Is there an area of knowledge? Is it not knowledge, it is actually putting into practice what you know? The founder of OM George Verwer once wrote

that for all the books he had read, the seminars he'd heard, all the bible he knew, his life should be so much more Christ like than it was. Maybe a way to think is to use our core values - as a church to be up in out, but that is also a desire for each of us - to be 3 dm christians, So does that help to consider, where in my personal worship, where in my prayer life, where in my relationships with other believers, where in my walking the dust of Jesus - my discipleship, where in my serving others around me in my street or work place where can I move forward in sharing my faith... I don't suggest doing all. But to reflect and think. I want to move on, grow, dig deeper, get rid of the weeds, get more light of Christ in, finally to do it... Perhaps for some, our Alpha course is the right time right thing for the next part of your journey - hearing and tackling questions with others - how do I resist evil, what does the Holy Spirit do, how and why should I pray, how can I have faith? how can I make the most of the rest of my life. One reason Alpha is popular is that, as a group meet together for the 10 weeks, they journey together, in growing closer to Jesus and what to means to follow him and live like him...

Whatever is your journey. At times there will be battles and blessings. Sometimes blessings then battles, other times, blessings in one area of life, battles in another. I don't know how the magi felt as they travelled. Were they sustained by the vision - to come close to the king. At times, did they say to one another, like our kids can say when we travel again to see relatives, are we there yet?! What will be your journey to come closer this year. Let someone close to you know and ask them to pray that it doesn't become like some new year resolutions.

Nicky Gumbel shares: 'I belong to a squash club, which is also a gym. Each year on January 1st, they bring in extra gym equipment. The place is packed out. By about January 7th they move all the

extra equipment out again, as most people have given up on their New Year's resolution and the club returns to normal!"

Share your journey aim. Perhaps come to our prayer teams ask them to commit it with you to God. You may of course, have no plan - you feel you don't need to - well can i suggest. Take it to the Lord. Dare to ask him. Lord I have no plan. Lord I don't think I need one. And then ask him, Lord, do you have a plan? You may even hear a laugh from the Lord. But if you pray over it this coming month, I expect something will come to mind.

Response.

The magi arrive. Jerusalem – the capital city, a logical place to seek for the King of the Jews. Yet he is not there. In fact, unknown to everyone there, the King of the Jews is in a house 8km away. But no one knows about Jesus! The royalty don't know – King Herod – and the Jewish leaders don't know – it is a set of dusty, long travelled Gentiles who let them know what is happening!

The Wise men make their public announcement. The response of Herod and the city – both are disturbed. The Jewish leaders are asked where the King is to be born – and they know the answer – Bethlehem. Now this is where things for me get strange. No one seems apart from Herod quite interested in all of this.

Herod has his own plans – devious and nasty. He meets secretly. The city know these people have arrived – if people know Herod has met with them, people may think there is substance to the arrival rather than a bunch of eccentric star gazers. Herod finds out when the baby is born - when the star appeared – so he has a rough age to target at – but rather than send his soldiers off, he

lets the wise men do his work – find the baby, come back and tell him and he will go and worship too.

But it is everyone else – there is no excited response. The Jewish leaders don't pack their bags and shoes and head off down the road. Come on, what is 8km, even to check it out. 30 mins on the bike. I mean, they knew all the OT promises I mentioned – surely, men from the east didn't turn up each day following a star?

The image is, the Jewish leaders didn't care or weren't interested. Or were hampered by fear. All Jerusalem was *disturbed* when the wise men arrived and asked that question.

They didn't want to make the journey.

The wise men have a different response. They head off after their interview with Herod, and they come to Bethelhem. We see three elements to their response. We see **joy** – a close translation says: "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy!" But we see this joy is more than just joy when people see a new baby – joy we might have had when we see a new grandchild or a friend's baby – it is more than that. These wise men, these scholars and royal advisors – brains on legs – they **kneel down**. Imagine in that hospital, you see a baby and the doctors and surgeons and midwives kneel down. You'd think there is something going on. The wise men are **humble** – they are great. They recognise someone truly great. And then the wise men **bring their gifts** – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Costly gifts. These wise men worship Jesus – and show us that response to Jesus is worship, and it is to be joyful, recognising how great and awesome is our God – kneeling – and should be characterised by bringing our gifts to him. Gifts does not mean money – though it may do – but bringing what God has gifted us in. It may be our time, our abilities, our life experience, our talents,

our energy, and of course our life which is our most precious gift to him, of letting him be on our throne and in charge.

So, the wise men visit shows again that God's plans are put into action in his timing and when and where he wants but his plans will not be defeated.

They embarked on a journey - planned yet guided by God - to get closer to the King of the Jews.

We see the worship response of the wise men to Jesus – joyful, humble, costly and lavish. We see the tragic response of the Jewish leaders – not really interested yet just 8 km away God's promises are beginning to come true. The Kingdom is beginning to break in..

Shall we pray.