

## **'Epiphany' – SJD - 8/1/17 – Matthew 2: 1-12, Ephesians 3: 1-12**

When Julius Caesar died in 44BC, one of the most astonishing flukes in history took place. A *supernova* appeared in the sky above his funeral pyre. Everyone assumed, of course, that he had gone to join the pantheon of the gods. Thereafter, stars for great men were emphatically in fashion!<sup>1</sup> But such imagery was not new. It is also to be found in ancient Jewish literature. In Numbers 24:17,19 we read the famous prophecy of Balaam, ***'I see him but not now; I behold him but not near; a star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.....A ruler will come out of Jacob'***. Most people in the ancient world believed in astrology<sup>2</sup>. A new star or unusual comet or conjunction of stars suggested that God or the gods was breaking into the ordered world presenting some special news – hence the Magi's delight and journey of discovery.

For them, though it proved to be a far richer voyage of discovery than they could ever have imagined. It became a journey of a faith resulting ultimately in a great celebration of divine activity. They had come prepared for the celebration bringing, what to us may seem strange gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold is the gift fit for a king. Frankincense was in constant use by priests in the temple so symbolising the only priest we would ever need between us and God. The myrrh was used to embalm the dead symbolising how this priest would achieve reconciliation between people and God. So in the 3 gifts we see who Jesus is, what he came to do and what it would cost him. Did the magi understand all this – I doubt it – but then God has a great capacity to use us all even though we may not fully comprehend the good we may be doing – that is a part of the wonder of the incarnation – a true epiphany!

So what are some of the lessons of this journey?

### **1. It is a journey worth undertaking**

One writer I was reading recently wrote this, ***'It is in this weaving of our life with God's life that we are able to discover our true identity as human beings'***.<sup>3</sup> Sub consciously at least, we see ourselves as largely controlling our lives while wandering through God's created world. We forget that this world is still in the creative hand of God – being altered and moulded through His Spirit. So as we interact with this world we interact with God at work and indeed can become a vessel of God's activity and creativity. Hence the Magi by travelling after the star became a part of God's revelatory story of the birth of His Son. We too can travel, just as the Magi did, on a path led and guided by God's light. For them it was a visible light in the heavens, whereas for us it is often the light of revelation through his word and sacrament made clear by the indwelling Holy Spirit – an inner prompting or guidance. But it is a journey nonetheless – a journey of discovery. This journey offers rich opportunities both for the discovery of God Himself and how He is working but also of self - discovery. Who we are cannot be found by mere introspection – it requires objectivity – a view from outside ourselves – a view God is perfectly placed to give. So as we interact with

---

<sup>1</sup> Source of this is Michael Green (1988) 'Matthew for Today', Hodder & Stoughton p. 49

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green op cit p. 49

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Jones, (Archdeacon of Merionydd), (2015) in 'The Little Advent Book' Pub. William Collins p56

God we are able to discern how He views us and therefore how we should understand ourselves. Perhaps like the Magi as we journey we too may discover that all of life can take us back to God where we find our true meaning and fulfilment.

## **2. It is a difficult journey but one with great spiritual rewards**

I cannot begin to imagine what the journey meant for the Magi, in physical terms. Such a journey cannot have been easy. It brought them into new situations and cultures probably outside their experience. But we see that it brought great rewards too, though perhaps not those expected. Not only do the Magi discover the infant Christ but they also leave a legacy: They are recorded for all posterity as the first representative 'gentiles' of the new kingdom God is calling into being. That Matthew, who wrote his Gospel for Jewish readers, should omit the story of the Hebrew shepherds but include that of the Gentile Magi, speaks masses of the transforming era that Jesus is bringing in. This new equality with the Jews is also seen in the way God chooses to communicate to the Magi. Though once led by a star, they are later guided by a God centred dream – just as Joseph<sup>4</sup> had been and would be. There is now little or no difference between Jew and Gentile as God draws both to Himself and into His being. During the journey, God begins to lead the Magi into this new relationship, into these 'new' truths just as he will lead us into all truth, as we journey along his path.

## **3. Ultimately it is a journey into life**

TS Eliot, in his famous poem, 'Journey of the Magi' closes with these lines:

***'We returned to our places, these kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.<sup>5</sup>  
I should be glad of another death'.***

Their pre-journey lives were now seen in a different light. Their priorities had changed. The reality of the Christ child made their old lifestyle and priorities seem empty – so much so that they wished to leave this lifestyle behind them – to put it to death that they may move on into a new and living reality. When they look back the Magi can see that their journey is in fact one that takes them from death into life. This imagery, of course, also foreshadows the events to come in the life of Christ himself<sup>6</sup> as well as lying at the heart of the Eucharist we share together today. As we all journey on our path into God we need to put to death those things that inhibit us and are of the old life, to free us to explore the new life Christ provides. This journey has no purpose unless it leads us into God Himself – the source of all life and being. As the writer I quoted at the beginning says:

***'Pilgrimage is ultimately about progressing into the heart of God. It is about journeying together into God's call to perfection and into a fullness of life ..'***<sup>7</sup>

May we all know the reality of that journey and the wonder of meeting with God through the Christ child. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:20 and 2:13, 19.

<sup>5</sup> TS Eliot 'Journey of the Magi'

<sup>6</sup> George Williamson (1967 ed) 'A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot' Thames & Hudson p. 164

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Jones op.cit. p 56-57.