

Epiphany 2019 – Matthew 2:1-12 – Openness to God in 2019

Coming to end of Christmas season – on this the 12th day of Christmas, also known as Epiphany, we get one last hurrah. I love the wise men, they're probably my favourite nativity characters (apart from Jesus, obviously). And today is all about them. But why do I love them so much? Not just the sense of the exotic or their strange gifts, though that helps: the wise men remind us that the good news of Jesus' coming into the world is for everyone – God meets *all of us* where we are, and leads the most unlikely people to worship him. And that includes people like you, or me.

The wise men, or to use their proper name, Magi, are the wildest of all the wild cards in the story (and the story is full of them). By the first century, the term 'Magi' referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. So, think 'magicians'. Other references to Magi in the bible include the magicians in Egypt at the time of Moses, or the interpreters of dreams in the book of Daniel, or Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8.

So, for an early reader of Matthew's gospel, the Magi aren't just Gentiles (significant though that is); they represent the height of Gentile idolatry and religious wizardry. But it's these star-gazing, horoscope-writing, would-be magicians who are the heroes in the story. The point is: *they shouldn't be there*. They don't worship the right God or adhere to the right religion or belong to the right race. And yet here they are, at the heart of the greatest story of them all. God is at work in the most unlikely people – people like you, people like me.

In some ways, they're more like the Three Stooges than the Three Wise Men! Read the story with fresh eyes and you'll notice: they go to the wrong place. They speak to the wrong person. When they give gifts, it's gold, frankincense and myrrh, which were elements used in their magic. And yet, by a mysterious combination of God's loving grace and their faithful seeking, they are there – as models of seeking Jesus, of believing in Jesus, and of worshipping Jesus with what they have.

What's important about the wise men is their openness to God. They are looking for his activity, they are obedient to his promptings – whether it's the star, the journey, the gifts they gave, their obedience to the dream, they are open to God. *That's* the message that transcends all cultures, religious or otherwise – God loves people who are open to him and seek him.

So as we reflect today, let's look again at three key elements to the story of wise men:

The first is **The Sign** – 'we saw his star'. At this point we need to fill in some blanks. The text itself tells us nothing about where the Magi came from, how they spent their time, really anything else about them. The back story is all guesswork. But it's a fairly safe bet that these Magi wouldn't have noticed this star unless they were looking for it, investing their time, preparing themselves. If it was just a lucky guess would they really have travelled so far to follow it, whatever the expense, whatever the dangers involved? No, these guys must have dedicated themselves to their task, they were expectant, they gave themselves to their task. And God gave them the sign they sought.

As a new year begins, it's worth asking the question of ourselves: what signs are there in your life at present – where is God at work, where is He leading you? The story of the bible is that signs aren't just random: yes, we can't predict them, but generally God only gives them to those who are ready, who are hungry, who are likely to obey the sign that he offers. Is God nudging you with any signs at present? How will you respond?

And if not, will we, like the wise men, commit ourselves this year to look more carefully for them? To seek God for His will in important parts of our lives? And, of course, be ready to obey? The wise men risked a lot to follow their sign – are we ready to do the same?

The second is **The Gift**. We usually have a laugh at the Magi's gifts, which are certainly the strangest you'll ever see for a baby shower – but it's easy to miss that these gifts were spot on, the right gifts for the right time. Apart from revealing Jesus' kingly identity, the gold and incense fulfilled an important prophecy from Isaiah 60 about God's chosen Messiah being not just for the Jews but for all people. And the myrrh of course points to Jesus' death as being a key part of the story.

These gifts were also costly, they reflected the heart of the Magi to honour their calling. And again, looking at the story as we often do at the start of the year, it's worth asking ourselves, like the Magi: what gifts can you offer to God at this time? They may be the same ones you've offered before, or they may be new. They may even be unexpected. But the point is: all God ever asks is that we offer the right gifts at the right time. What can we offer God this year?

So, the sign, the gift, and finally, **The Dream** – it's not only Joseph who gets the dreams in Matthew's gospel. The Magi too are warned in a dream to head a different way home. I don't know if you've ever had significant dreams. Most of the ones I remember involve me being attacked by domesticated animals – no idea what that means! Dreams by their nature are unplanned, often strange. But it's amazing how God sometimes uses them. Perhaps you've had a significant dream. I read recently how many Muslims are turning to faith in places like Iran primarily through Jesus meeting them in dreams. In fact I know someone in one of our congregations who also came to faith that way. It does happen.

The thing about the wise men's dream is that I suspect they were already troubled by their encounter with Herod. The dream they then had reinforced, if you like, that unease and gave them a plan. And that's often how significant dreams work: they reinforce our general direction.

What do you dream for 2019? What direction would you like it to go? You may have many answers to that question, or none at all, but I want to ask you to think in terms of faith and where God is at work in your life. In a way it's like the sign question but a bit broader. What are your God-given dreams? How might you act on them in 2019?

Just before I close, I want to reflect for a few minutes on what this text might be saying to us as a church. Do spend time this week thinking about it for you personally and if any of it relates to us here, then great, make sure you tell me! But what about us as a community?

I need to share something significant which some of you already know, but needs to be made public to all of you. At the end of November I learnt that the diocese was pulling out of its commitment to give us a new full-time pioneer minister to come and plant a church in the new estate this year. I must also say that there is no possibility of a reversal of this decision, it is final.

Needless to say, it was a heavy blow and I spent some time trying to understand why and what the options were instead. In a nutshell they've made a permanent change to how they intend to start new churches, essentially opting to try and start a lot of small things rather than a few big things, and we are the first and probably worst casualty of the change, as we were at the top of the list. We discussed it at length in the stewards' council early in December. I've also spent a lot of time in prayer over the last few weeks, and although I must say it still hurts I am also convinced that

God actually has a different plan for us – one which is in some ways far more exciting. **I believe that he wants us to go ahead anyway, and to do this ourselves.**

It's a bold call, but I really believe God intends to do something amazing, something we can tell our grandchildren about in years to come (if we have them). We're gathering a team and we'll be soaking it in prayer – but this is the sign that God has given us and it's now up to us to follow this particular star. It might not be the sign we wanted but in a funny way it does fulfil the last bit of the text we've been using this last year – I wonder if you remember it from Psalm 126:

*Restore our fortunes O lord, like streams in the desert;
those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.*

God is restoring our fortunes, there's so much going on here now and lots to look forward to in this coming year – but as yet there were no tears, and to be honest I didn't really want that bit to be true, so I forgot about it. But, thanks to the diocese, tears have been shed now, which in a funny way is some comfort. As I shared at the beginning of last year, this is our season of sowing, in fact let's call it our **season of planting**. Our commitment to TRY has yielded great fruit already – think of Cafe Church, Quiz Nights, Prayer after services, the Remembrance weekend – well here's the biggest TRY of all.

And that means I need each and every one of you. We need people to get stuck in – not just with whatever might start to happen on the new estate, but back here too, in fact *especially here* so that we don't just rob Peter to pay Paul. My question about gifts has a new urgency: so many of you are committed here, and thank you to all of you who are, but maybe for a few this is your time to get in the game a bit more. Maybe there's a new gift you can offer, a new role you could take on.

This is a once in a generation moment for us. This estate will only be built once. The conversations we're having with the community who want us to be at the heart of the new development will only happen in this season. *This is our moment.* It is also our fork in the road, if you will: this is what will determine whether people talk about St Mary's in 20 years' time as a the story you'll tell your grandchildren, how God did amazing things and transformed us; or we'll be left out in the cold and the mantle will be passed on to others.

I look around and I firmly believe that we can be that transformed church, that God wants to reveal his glory through us. We might not feel like that kind of church, but every time I go back to the bible I read that God chooses the weak to shame the strong, he chooses Gideon, he chooses the youngest of 8 David, he chooses the son of a carpenter, he chooses some star-gazers to be invited guests at the nativity.....

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How will worship God this year? Where will he lead you? What signs is he giving you? What will you offer him? What is your dream?

Let's be open to God's work in our lives this year.