

Midnight Communion 2025 – The True Light (John 1:9) (sequel to ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’)

‘Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see...’

I wonder if any of you saw the Northern Lights over Milton Keynes last year? There were faint shows in May and August 2024, and then a really spectacular one in October. When you live in a city, even on the edge of one, we tend not to bother looking up at the sky at night – there’s too much artificial light pollution – but that was a moment to treasure, for those of you who saw it. I did see the faint show in May 2024, but to my regret I didn’t bother to go out in October. Who knows when we’ll get that kind of opportunity again?

The sky is a marvellous treasure. Vast, majestic, constantly changing. I wonder what your favourite sky is: the cloudless clear blue of spring or summer; or maybe the dramatic storm clouds; a sunrise or sunset; or maybe a starry night. Many of our greatest artists are celebrated partly because of their capacity to capture the sky: think of Turner, or Constable, or Van Gogh. Human endeavour has long attempted to find ways into the sky – whether by climbing a mountain, trying to fly and, ultimately, by trying to get beyond it into space.

But there’s one common thread in all of these reflections – **first we have to look up.**

Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see.

For those of you who came to the Carol Service on Sunday, that was the key line – it was inspired by the great song Bohemian Rhapsody, which was the Christmas number 1 exactly 50 years ago, in 1975, and indeed stayed at the top of the charts for 9 weeks.

On Sunday we thought about that line primarily from the point of view of the shepherds. Those rough men on the hillside outside Bethlehem, mostly condemned to a life of poverty, social isolation and hardship, dreaming perhaps of a better future, even of violent revolution. People used to looking up at the sky, because the weather was everything to them. And God met them, wondrously, in the way that **took that very habit – looking up to the sky – and used it miraculously for his glory.** The great light that the prophet Isaiah foresaw hundreds of years previously came literally to the shepherds, as the sky was filled with the light of angelic beings, praising God and singing ‘glory in the highest heaven’.

In our traditional reading from John 1, we’ve just heard about Jesus as ‘the true light’ – and light is a theme that permeates the Christmas story. On Sunday, we thought about the angelic light that led the shepherds to the true light, Jesus Christ. But there was another group, also led by heavenly light towards the Saviour – and **these gentlemen opened their eyes, looked up to the skies and saw something very different.**

I am of course talking about the Magi or Wise Men or Kings. And again, these were people who built their lives around looking up to the skies. They were stargazers, and once more God used their habit of a lifetime to dramatically change their lives. They saw a special star – modern science tells us that it might have been the very rare alignment of Jupiter and Saturn, which really does happen every few hundred years – but the point is that they too opened their eyes, looked up to the skies and saw a light which pointed them towards the true light.

And so they packed their bags and headed off on a dangerous, costly journey of hundreds of miles, risking bandits, illness and their reputations to find a king. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

We know the rest of the story. We celebrate it and treasure it every year. But too often we forget what a *crazy* thing it was to do. There was no guarantee of success. Indeed, failure was far more likely. Or execution – had they returned to Herod. Both the shepherds and the Magi had to risk looking like fools.

What made the difference? It was that what they saw was so amazing, so remarkable, they couldn't help *but* act on it. It still comes back to what we see.

What do you see when you look at the Christmas story? Or to be more specific, when you look at that baby in the manger? A heartwarming story that teaches family values and being nice to people? Or something so vital, so urgent, so real, so true, so full of life and possibility that you can do nothing else but respond like the Magi and give your treasures to him, or like the shepherds and tell everyone whom you've just met?

What do you see?

Because it's possible not to see it. Herod and the teachers of the law looked up to the skies and saw... only darkness. They could not overcome the light – but how they tried. They didn't see. And really they didn't see because they didn't want to see. Because Jesus disrupts things. Jesus doesn't just stay in the manger, or sit on his mother's knee smiling sweetly. He grows up and calls out to all of us: Come, follow me. Risk being thought of a fool, and you will find the key to life.

Perhaps it's safer not to see – at least in the short term. If what matters is comfort, or reputation. Stay in bed – but you might miss the northern lights!

Fast forward 6 weeks from this Christmas night and let me close with an old man and long held dream. Mary and Joseph come to offer a sacrifice for their firstborn, and Simeon meets Jesus in the temple and takes him in his arms, and says, what? **My eyes have seen....**

Seen what? A light for revelation to the Gentiles – in other words the whole population of the rest of the world. The true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world. Simeon saw it. The shepherds saw it. The Magi saw it.

Do you see it?

Open your eyes, look up to the skies, and see...

Amen.