

6 January 2019

Isaiah 60.1-6

Matthew 2.1-12

I have three questions for us as we face this new year together – three questions that arise from the story of the wise men and their visit to Bethlehem to worship the child Jesus.

1. What star are you following?

It is quite remarkable that this story of the wise men coming to worship Jesus ever survived in the early years of the Christian church.

If you look at any of the teachings of the early church in the first two or three centuries, pretty much the only mention that ‘magi’ get is to warn people about their superstitions, their false wisdom, their dependence on the arts of magic ... their devotion to false gods ...

Magi had an esteemed place in many cultures of the time – they were the wise ones who would be consulted when important decisions had to be made. They often had an important place at court or with civic rulers. They used all sorts of means to discern what was happening in the world.

Their interest in the movement of the stars meant that some of them were extraordinary scientists and mathematicians ... but they would use all sorts of other superstitious means to delve into the secrets of the universe and into the minds of the gods. They almost certainly would have been deeply religious ... but their religious beliefs would have been very different to the beliefs of the Jews and the Christians.

And yet these are the very people that God draws to Bethlehem ... in Matthew’s story, they are the *only* people that recognise that something spectacular has happened in the birth of Jesus. For everyone else, the world just carries on as normal.

And God has spoken to them on their terms. He has got inside their world and drawn them in a way that they will recognise. They are star-gazers ... and so God uses their obsession with the movement of the stars in order to grab their attention and set them on a journey of discovery.

It would have been very easy for the early church to get very nervous about all of this. They could very easily have said to Matthew – ‘Look, don’t you think this is just a bit risky? Won’t people get the wrong idea? Won’t this story just legitimise superstition and give people the wrong idea about magi ... that after all they are OK with their crazy ideas about the movement of the stars and all of their other magic and superstition?’

But the story stuck ...

And it speaks so profoundly of so many aspects of the coming of Jesus.

At the beginning of Matthew’s telling of the story of Jesus – the story that ends with the disciples being sent into all the world to make disciples of all people – the story begins with God drawing to Jesus people from the ends of the world ... from among the nations ... to worship this newborn king.

But it also speaks of the many different ways that God will use to draw us to himself. And God will always use ways that are appropriate to who we are.

Within the Christmas story we have examples of God using different ways of speaking to different people. With the shepherds he uses angels in the dead of night. With the wise men he uses a star.

With Joseph, he speaks through dreams.

What Matthew is really interested in as he tells this story is how different aspects of this story fulfil the words of the prophets – that is clearly how God speaks to Matthew.

If God wanted to get through to me, the last thing he would use is a star in the sky.

I have no interest in astrology at all ... and I have little more interest in astronomy. I don't know my Ursa Major from my Orion.

But God finds other ways of nudging me and drawing me and giving direction to my life. And he does so in ways that he knows that I will respond to. It will almost certainly not be the way that he uses to give direction to your life ... because you may need something different.

As God set a star in the sky to draw the magi to himself, so we can be sure, God will be at work in our lives to draw us closer to himself.

And so I am asking you as you enter this new year, what star are you following?

How is God at work in your life to draw you closer to Christ?

Be assured, God is at work in our lives. He has an interest in each one of us. Our stories might not be as dramatic as the story of the magi – our stories may not be written down to encourage and inspire others – but God is at work.

And there is no use thinking that God wouldn't be at work in me, because I am an outsider, I don't really fit the mould ... because that was just where the magi were.

What star are you following?

2. What assumptions are being challenged?

When the magi followed the star, they had certain assumptions about what they would find at the other end of their journey.

They give the game away about their assumptions when they make straight for the palace in Jerusalem.

They had believed that the star was a sign of the birth of a king. And everyone knows where kings are born. They are born in palaces!

But not this king!

And they stir up something of a hornet's nest simply by asking the question. Herod is alerted to the fact that there just might be a rival around.

And they are sent to Bethlehem ... and on their journey find that if they had been more attentive to the star ... that's exactly where they would have ended up.

And they end up in an ordinary village home – no mention here of a stable – worshipping a child who has none of the usual trappings of royalty and privilege.

The textbook for kingship is torn up. They have to learn afresh. Their assumptions are smashed.

And our life with God is always like this.

When God takes hold of us, we have certain assumptions about what God is like – and most of the time we have made God in our own image (if I were God, this is how I would be God).

And I don't think that this only happens at the beginning of our life with God. I think it is going on all of the time.

Our growth in faith and understanding of God is as much about what we have to 'unlearn' about God as it is about what we have to 'learn' about God.

So, as you journey into this new year, what assumptions are you making about God that God is challenging?

Have you got to start thinking about God in surprising new ways, that are in line with all that God teaches us about himself in Jesus?

What assumptions are being challenged?

3. What gifts do you bring?

Their gifts were varied and their gifts were costly ... their gifts were symbolic ... their gifts were right for them.

Traditionally – gold for a king; frankincense for a priest; myrrh for burial.

These gifts could only have been brought by people like this.

They would have been meaningless if I had brought these gifts.

We are only able to bring to Jesus the gifts that we have and the people that we are ... and Jesus does not expect anything else of us.

When I was in the process of preparing this sermon I got out a scrap piece of paper to write down the reading for Sally.

It was words of a Christmas song that we must have used when I was a minister in Watford. I can't even remember the tune of this song – but these are the words ... and they seem to chime in so closely with what I am trying to say:

I want to see your baby boy,
But have no gift for you.
So Mary, if you'll pardon me,
There's one thing I can do:

*I'll sing a song, a special song,
written for a King;
I bring a song, a special song,
I bring a song to sing.*

I've never heard of myrrh before,
I don't know where it's found.
I haven't any frankincense,
There's not much gold around:

I'll sing a song ...

So as we renew our covenant today, our common life depends upon each of us offering what we have to serve Jesus.

But we shouldn't judge what we are called to bring by looking at other people and their gifts. We are only ever called to give of who we are and from what we have.

And nor are we called to offer the same today as we did five or ten years ago. What we have to offer may change.

So at the beginning of this new year, and as we renew our covenant with one another:

What star are you following?

What assumptions are being challenged?

What gifts will you bring?