

Sermon Jan 3rd 2016 The Wise Men.

This is one of the most intriguing passages in the NT. They appear almost from nowhere, give gifts to the infant Jesus, then disappear without trace.

First of all, who were they? They're called Magi in the bible – a difficult word to translate. They were serious men, seekers after truth, professional priests, philosophers, scientists, astrologers. There were quite a lot of them, a sort of priestly, educated class, permanent advisors to the Kings of Persia. The meaning later became rather debased - it was used of sorcerers, and gave us the English word magic and magician. In those days almost everyone believed in astrology, and any unusual star in the sky would have caught their attention and interest. Their number is not given in the bible, and the tradition that there were three is simply a deduction from the number of gifts they gave. As for the star, there are several possible astronomical events which they might have seen around that time, but there's no reason why it shouldn't have been a one-off phenomenon, specially arranged by God. After all, the birth of his only son was a one-off event.

However, the first thing that strikes us about them is their determination. Those of you who were at our Carol service will remember Tony's masterly recitation of the poem "The Journey of the Magi" by T S Eliot. I mention the poem now partly as a tribute to Peter Farquhar, whose sudden death last year was such a severe blow to us as a church and to many of us personally. I remember he used this poem in a sermon more than once in the last few years. Eliot uses his imagination, I think, to great effect in these verses. The poem begins:

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

In other words, it wasn't an easy matter for the wise men to follow the star, but they were absolutely determined to get to the bottom of what it meant. Are we as anxious as they were to learn the truth?

There's a brief passage later in Matthew when Jesus fires off several short parables in a row. Here are two of them:

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Now if you're like me, you'll find some of the parables a little tricky to get to the heart of. But there's no problem about these! Do we prize the kingdom of God in these terms? Or are there other things more important? Each of us will answer that question in our own way. Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is speaking about the lilies of the field and clothing and food – the things we tend to worry about - and God's care for us, (you know the passage well), and as if to reassure us he says "**But seek**

first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” Not bad for a New Year’s resolution!

2. I’m going to look briefly at **The Three Gifts:** Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. I’ll remind you of their traditional significance, then by a sort of verbal sleight of hand, (if that’s a mixed metaphor – too bad!) we’ll think about what significance each one might have for us ourselves. You’ll see what I mean. **Gold** was traditionally thought of as a gift for a king, and was therefore entirely appropriate for the baby Jesus. Also, a gift of gold enriches the recipient. How are we enriched, if we worship Jesus and enter the kingdom of God? (And by the kingdom of God I mean the fellowship of all believers who are spread throughout the world, but worship the same God, and Jesus as their Saviour.)

There are many ways of answering this. Here are one or two. When we enter that kingdom, we move up a gear spiritually. It’s like finding the top gear in a car - the overdrive. We add an extra dimension to our lives. In some ways, the going becomes smoother. Or like using superior petrol: we move along more powerfully. Or perhaps it’s like driving with a more powerful engine. With the Holy Spirit in our lives we have a new direction, a new confidence, a new power. Not that the going is necessarily any easier, but we’re more in tune with our Creator and begin to see the world through his eyes. God’s perspective is often very different from our own. We find we are more inclined to put God at the centre of things, rather than ourselves. And that of course reflects reality – it’s how things actually are. We live life with a greater sensibility and insight and understanding. In a way, to use the modern slang, we get real. That’s the enrichment gold of the kingdom can bring.

The second gift was FRANKINCENSE - a symbol of deity, what the priest used in worshipping god. Many of you will know the ancient myth about Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was the man who designed the labyrinth on Crete where the Minotaur – half-man and half-bull – was imprisoned. Daedalus and his son Icarus wanted to escape from Crete, but were forbidden by King Minos. So he stuck feathers together and made wings with which he and his son Icarus were able to fly. Off they went. But D warned his son not to fly too high, or the sun would melt the wax holding the feathers together, nor too low, as the spray would wet and ruin the feathers. But of course he flew too high, rejoicing in his new-found freedom, and plunged to his death in the sea. Now part of the moral of that story is this – don’t presume you’re like the gods, otherwise you’ll come a cropper. In the story, men look up at the flying pair and say they must be gods if they can fly. Much of Greek tragedy, from which all our theatre and acting developed, was concerned with men or women who went too far, or thought they could manage without obeying the gods, or even acted like gods in their own lives. And some of these plays, many still produced today, are like sermons reminding us not to get too big for our boots. **BUT** through Jesus, God turned this idea on its head. Jesus actually said “You’ll be able to do what I do, and more”! How? Because we have the power of the Holy Spirit. In the very first chapter of John’s gospel, after only eleven verses, we read “To all who received him (Jesus), those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” God’s power was shown through Paul and Barnabas when they went to Lystra, in modern Turkey, less than 20 years later, and healed people. The citizens were so impressed that they thought they were two pagan gods come

to earth - Jupiter and Mercury! Paul and Barnabas were horrified, and had great difficulty in preventing the citizens from carrying out sacrifices to them. That's the frankincense – used by priests for worshipping God.

BUT, and it's a very important "but", there's more. MYRRH, the third gift, is an oil used in embalming dead bodies, therefore it's a symbol of death. In Jesus' case this looks forward to Calvary and the cross. How can this apply to us? Lots of metaphors are used of the step of faith and the subsequent process of getting to know Jesus better. We've touched on the concept of entering a kingdom. Several times Jesus refers to a party, sometimes a wedding feast, a really happy occasion. And you'll remember Jesus' chat with Nicodemus, when death and life and new birth are used as metaphors. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that in order to enter the kingdom of God you need to be born a second time – a spiritual birth rather than a physical birth. St Paul writes about putting your old self to death, and he concludes that if anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creature. This is what one of our prayers refers to as "newness of life". Some of us can look back to a specific moment when our salvation took place, others look back and realise it was a very gradual process. But after that change takes place, repentance, salvation, whatever you call it, there's no doubt that there is also an ongoing process for the rest of our lives, which we call sanctification, during which we become more and more like Jesus.

We began this service with that splendid hymn "As with gladness". It was written by a man called William Chatterton Dix. He was an insurance agent who lived in Bristol. On Sunday Jan 6th 1860 (feast of Epiphany) he lay in bed, too ill to go to church, and read in his bible the passage for that day, which we heard this morning. By the next morning he had written his great hymn, which has been so popular ever since. That act of creation took place literally overnight. For some, the act of salvation comes overnight, but the process of sanctification carries on until we die.

Now the wise men didn't have all this knowledge which we enjoy when they visited the crib. They were curious, determined, and surely also must have approached the baby with awe and wonder and excitement as they handed over their precious gifts. They knew this was something really important. But what after? We don't know. All we know is that they had the good sense not to report back to Herod with news of the baby's precise location. They probably heard nothing about Jesus again in their own lifetimes. But the seed was sown. Were their lives changed? It's hard to imagine they weren't. TS Eliot ends his poem with the wise men puzzled, dissatisfied:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

In the poem, the wise men remain uncertain, but we are fortunate enough to have the scriptures, and two millennia of Christian experience to draw on, and in this country, free access to all this information. We have no excuses! Each day we can take a step further forward in the kingdom in the company of Christ and draw closer to God.

These are mysteries, and we won't discover the full truth until we die. But we can always penetrate further this side of the grave. That's the excitement and challenge of the New Year, which is a good time to revisit these promises God has made to us, and those we may have made to him.

Seeds planted in winter have time to germinate. The fruit comes later. Steady faith and obedience, prayer and bible reading have their effect and bear fruit in time. There is always time for God to become a greater part of your way of life. This is true at any stage in the Christian life. So there's a worthwhile New Year Resolution: no point in not aiming high! Icarus with his man-made wings aimed high, and suffered for it, but there will be no watery grave for us... God doesn't slap us down if we strive to approach him, rather he lifts us up to be like him, and ultimately with him. Provided we approach God with the right attitude.

This anecdote about Horatio Nelson makes the point well, and with this I'll end. Nelson, the great admiral, always treated his defeated opponents with the greatest kindness and courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the losing admiral was brought aboard Nelson's flagship and on to Nelson's quarter-deck. Knowing Nelson's reputation for courtesy, and thinking to trade upon it, he advanced across the quarter-deck with hand outstretched as if he was advancing to shake hands with an equal. Nelson's hand remained by his side. "Your sword first," he said, "and then your hand." Before we can be friends with Christ, we must submit to Christ.

Let us all pray that the coming year will bring each one of us closer to God as we, in obedience, learn to love him more. Amen.