

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany Sunday 5th January 2020

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This Christmas we have been following the star. Life and limb were risked putting up a banner announcing it to Mount Park Road, and little booklets of the same name have kept many of us company this Christmastide. But today is the day when the star truly gets its star-billing. Star of wonder, star of night, leading onward beaming bright. And the ones who are following its westward leading, still proceeding, those called variously magi, wise men or kings. Coming from the East, looking for a new king they bring with them the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh that we have just offered to the infant Christ in our crib here at St Peter's today.

For today is the feast of the Epiphany –meaning "manifestation, great revelation - showing." And today we are invited to consider what the wise men were shown and their gifts. But not the gold and frankincense and myrrh that they brought with them, but the gifts they received. The gifts offered to us at the start of this New Year.

Well, the first gift is that star itself. Guidance in a dark world. What we would now call astrology was a great science and widely seen as a way of predicting the future in ancient times. Several contemporary sources explain that at this time the world was expectant for a great new ruler to appear. And it was to the stars they looked. It was a dark world too in the sense that the old order of Gods and wonder was failing. Something new was yearned for.

Our wise men have been watching and waiting and preparing for a signal in the skies. They risk a journey whose end they cannot know and set off prepared to meet this new ruler or king. We do not know how long they had been waiting before they saw the star, where they met if they had indeed come from different lands. All we know is that night by night they saw and followed this same star. For us there can be great encouragement in knowing God's guiding help at all times in our lives. In the sunlit uplands and in the darker times. There are those who say that we travel farthest in these night time journeys than we do in the busyness of sunshine. Whatever time it is in our lives, the gift of the God's shining and guiding is ours today and every day.

The gift of the star leads the travellers to the showing of the Christ child and his mother in their simple home. The king was not to be found in the palaces of Jerusalem but in the poverty of Bethlehem. What was so much expected was in the end so wonderfully unexpected.

It is this gift to the wise men that artists have loved to show in paintings and on countless Christmas cards; the juxtaposition of the poorly clad and housed holy family and the rich brocades, furs and jewels of their visitors. All show the same truth, for as Matthew tells us the wise men are overwhelmed with joy, that they kneel and worship and offer their gifts.

Worldly Gentile pomp, magic and wisdom on its knees before this very unexpected Jewish-born king of kings. But this moment of the wise men giving their gifts is the moment of their receiving a gift beyond price.

The great gift of Epiphany to us all is the showing and sharing of God's loving purpose with the Gentile – non-Jewish world. And these visitors are that world's first representatives. For, for all their human glory, learning and power they have been outside what has been understood as God's purpose for His world.. But now for all the strangeness of their dress and wealth they have finally found where they belong, kneeling at Christ's feet. The time of yearning turned to a time of joy, and whatever our Christmases have held this year, whatever our expectations are for the year ahead there is time before the crib is put away to find our way home too.

This great gift of God's love for all humanity Paul describes in the reading we heard from his letter to the Ephesians this morning. Paul writes about the revelation of the wisdom and love of God in all its rich variety. A more direct translation is God's loving purpose "in all its many colours".

In all its many colours. Like the light through stained glass. Like the gorgeous robes of Jesus first Gentile visitors. Like starlight through a kaleidoscope. All the loveliness of everything that brings glory to God shed with generosity beyond words on us. Gold, frankincense, myrrh, the lights of our gifts, our intellects, our loves, all recognising the giver. For costly as they are they are only transformed to their true value once they have been given.

Recognising the gifts we have been given is a good response to epiphany. Our gifts of time, talents and goods. Recognising the things we have done with them in the past year. The ways we might spend them more generously in the year ahead.

Let this year be a time of shining gifts in us as our response to his great gift to us.. May 2020 see our gifts shared and transformed by his great and abiding love. Keep us on the road to Bethlehem when all the decorations have been put away And may it find us always following his star. **Amen**