Reflective Epiphany
06 Jan 2019

Matthew 2:1-12

And so we come to Epiphany – the next part of the story.
Of late, it seems, Epiphany has been rolled into Christmas – may be it's because of the presents, maybe because it's about people visiting the infant Jesus, maybe because it means more parts in the Nativity play….

Who knows?

But if we only consider the mysterious visitors from the East as the final act of the lavish Christmas production, then we miss out on oh, so, much. For the story of the Magi / the Wise Ones provokes deep questions about seeking and calling, about journeying and risk-taking, about following and about failing.

So – stripped of the makeshift crowns, the brocade curtains doubling as cloaks and the exotic but largely imaginary camels…. what does the story really tell us?

It tells us that there were at least two people somewhere out to the East of what we call the Holy Land, who were looking,
seeking,
searching,
asking questions
The reason why is lost in the mists of time. They could have been paid to do it – some sort of diplomatic or GCHQ type of role.
They could have been gripped with a desire to understand the universe – proto-scientists
They could have been philosophical types, who were searching for Truth, Beauty, or the answer to the problem of suffering.
We don't know.
What we can be pretty certain about is that they were not Jews – and that therefore in the understanding of the day, they were not part of the chosen people of God.
They were outsiders.

And we know something else as well – we know that they came to believe that they had seen a sign denoting that a new King of the Jews had been born.

And more than that, that this moved them to – well, move. To travel.
And why would they do that? To seek political advantage maybe? To verify their proto-scientific theory? Because there was something that spoke to them of truth and beauty?

Anyway – off they go. Not, at this stage, following the star, despite the thousands of Christmas card silhouettes showing otherwise. They go following the hints, the signs, which they have glimpsed, and presumably some sort of desire in their hearts, even if they cannot yet articulate what that is.

And unsurprisingly they rock up at the palace in Jerusalem - because where else would you expect to find the infant king of the Jews? – only to discover that the Jews already have a king thank you very much. Only he is not an infant, he is a fully-grown, paranoid puppet of the Roman Empire, and he has his own reasons for wanting to find this other ruler. Their initial instincts have led them to the wrong place.

Or maybe not entirely, for here they hear the word of God, the ancient prophecy that the Messiah, the great King of the Jews, will be born in Bethlehem. And they set off. And now the star goes ahead of them, it guides them into their encounter with the infant Jesus. Delivers them safely into his presence.

They are “overwhelmed with joy”. They “open their treasure chests”. And they are changed. They hear God’s warning. They go home “by a different road.”

So, what does this story have to tell us?

Firstly, at the start of the story the wise ones were looking outwards. They were people with enquiring minds, expecting that there would be new things for them to discover. They were testing, searching, exploring. Seeking more.

And it tells us that they saw something which meant more to them than home, comfort and security. Enough for them to leave all that behind and set off on a long and risky journey of uncertain outcome.

It’s a theme which recurs throughout the Bible, throughout literature, throughout human experience. Whether it’s the story of the Israelites travelling through the desert for 40 years following the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, or Bilbo

Baggins running out of his hobbit hole without a pocket handkerchief to join Gandalf and the dwarves, or young people on a gap year doing the (now well-worn) round the world trip, the idea of journeying is deeply ingrained into the human psyche.

In Christian terms it's right there too – the baptism service includes these words
May God, who has received you by baptism into his Church,
pour upon you the riches of his grace,
that ***within the company of Christ's pilgrim people***
you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit,
and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory.

It's pretty clear that life with God should be a pilgrimage, a journey of exploration and discovery – of God, of ourselves and of other people.

So, what do we think about journeys, about travelling?
Does the thought fill us with delight?
Or horror?
I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with journeying. I love the new, the exploration, the experience – but it's a constant internal battle with my natural aversion to risk – getting lost, becoming unwell, generally being "out-of-control".
I suspect I'm not alone in that.

Over the years, though, I have come to realise that if I want to reap the benefits of being somewhere rather than just seeing the pictures on the telly, then I need to be prepared to battle my desire for security and familiarity, and get out there.
[Fasilidas' Palace/Timkat]

And I would suggest that it's the same with our Christian journey. There will be highs, when we feel close enough to God to touch him, and our spirits soar and our hearts are filled with joy. Amazing experiences of an awesome God.

And there will be lows. Times of discomfort, maybe even fear. Like the Wise Ones, there will be times when we get it wrong. Times when we are pushed to our limits – outside our own capacity to cope. And maybe this fear can put us off from fully committing ourselves to journeying with God.

But, looking back, I think I can say that from my own experience it is in the bad or testing times that I have learned most about God. That is not to say that God deliberately sends us hard times, but that when they come, he is there in them with

us. They are times of growth, times of learning to trust, times of discovery that God really is faithful. They are times of refining, of throwing out excess baggage and discovering what is truly important.

Maybe we should be less fearful of taking the risk. And maybe we need to commit to keeping moving.

For the difficulty is, because we know that the Israelites came to the Promised Land, that Bilbo Baggins succeeded in his quest and returned to Bag End, that our gap year offspring return home with thousands of photographs and with piles of dirty washing, that we journey for a while and then come home and settle down. Maybe we think the quest is over when we have first encountered God. We become respectable members of the church who live within our limits. We lead decent lives, do good, and attend worship regularly. And all these things are good in and of themselves, but they are not seeking and they are not journeying. They are static.

Which is a big problem, because God does not call the church to be a safe, respectable membership organisation, but to be a movement (the clue is in the word) which will embody and extend his kingdom of love, justice, mercy and peace in the world.

So, like the Wise Ones, we too need to be looking outwards. We too need to be people with enquiring minds, expecting that there will be new things for us to discover about God. We too need to be testing, searching, questioning, exploring. Seeking more. Always on our journey with God.

So part of what this story tells us is that we need to be looking outward, and that we need to be willing to journey.

But, scratch a little beneath the surface of this story and we will find that there is a second thing.

As we said earlier, the Wise Ones came to believe that they had seen a sign denoting that a new King of the Jews had been born.

I wonder what was the source of that thought or belief?

They were inspired to travel to “pay homage”

I wonder where that inspiration came from?

They heard (or were told about) the prophecy which directed them to Bethlehem.

Who was the source of those words?

The star went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.

How did that happen, then?

We think of the Wise Ones as being seekers after God – and so they were. But equally we could reflect on the idea that God was seeking them. Drawing them on, drawing them in to him.

And here is something really important we need to remember. They were outsiders. They were not Jews. They were not the people of God.

And yet God met them where they were and drew them towards himself. As we begin to think about "growing more followers of Jesus" in this parish there is huge encouragement for us here.
God is already at work in people's lives.
Some people will see hints of God and have questions – they will be on their own journeys of discovery.
Some may not even have begun to put a name to what they are searching for, just have a sense that there is something more.
Our role is to be there, ready and willing to make the spaces and the opportunities for people to explore what they are experiencing.
To begin to discern what that flickering light on the edge of their consciousness might represent.
Our role is to be prepared to share our experiences, to answer their questions as best we can.
In "pilgrimage" language, our role is to walk alongside them and to share our journeys.
To help them to discern God's call to them.

So, two things to ponder
Are we seeking God with all of our being – constantly journeying closer to him? – upwards if you like
And are we prepared to journey alongside those whom God is calling from a long way off. To be open to sharing our lives and our journeys with them? – reaching outwards

about journeying and risk-taking,
about following and failing, about seeking and about calling?

Let's start with journeying and risk-taking
This week Paul and I have been watching the Rivers programmes on BBC2 – three one hour programmes each following one of the earth's great rivers from source to sea. Epic journeys all. My favourite one was the Nile, and not only because we have actually been to one of the places featured. If you saw the programme – it was the place where people were being baptized at the festival of Timkat – the Ethiopian Orthodox Epiphany - so very appropriate to be mentioned today! To get there was a journey within a journey – we travelled to Ethiopia to stay with my son and his wife, and then Paul and I went off for a few days travel within the country whilst Ally and Sophie were at work in Addis.
I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with journeying. I love the new, the exploration, the experience – but it's a constant internal battle with my natural aversion to risk – getting lost, becoming unwell, generally being "out-of-control". Over the years, though, I have come to realise that if I want to reap the benefits of being somewhere rather than just seeing the pictures on the telly, then I need to be prepared to battle my desire for security and familiarity, and get out there.

One of the great motifs of the Christian life is that of journeying. The baptism service includes these words

May God, who has received you by baptism into his Church,
pour upon you the riches of his grace,
that within the company of Christ's pilgrim people
you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit,
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It's pretty clear that life with God should be a pilgrimage, a journey of exploration and discovery – of God, of ourselves and of other people.

So – a question

Are we on a journey with God? Or are we stationary. (And now I'm not talking about a physical journey, but our own personal spiritual development.) Are we moving, learning, visiting new places, new ways of doing things? Are we up for the challenges a journey may bring? Things we have not encountered before? Things that scare us? People that scare us? Are we willing to take the risk and set off, with God, towards more of God?

> Do we approach our faith with enquiring minds? With enquiring hearts? Do we expect and seek to learn more of God? To experience more of God in new and different ways? Do we test our understanding? Review and refine our relationship with him?

I am mindful of the story of Jacob, on his journey, who stopped by the Jabbok and wrestled with God until the morning. Sometimes it feels like that. And we need to remember that God blessed Jacob, changed him, gave him a new name and new purpose and sent him out.

And we need to recognise that the Wise Ones didn't finish their journey when they met God. They didn't just sit around and say "I've met God now, I'm ok, I don't need to do anything further." They moved on, travelled on – changed by their encounter, but still journeying.

So three questions to ponder

Are we