

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 2 January 2022

The Magi's Three Journeys (Matthew 2:1-12)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Our Epiphany story tells of a group of people – a group of 'magi' – who headed off on a journey together in search of God. Like us, gathered here this morning at All Saints', the magi were searching for God. They'd been asking themselves a question. Their question was: where do we go to find God? It's a question each one of us asks at some stage: where do I go to find God?

This morning I'm going to reflect with you on the three journeys made by the magi. The first is the one to Jerusalem. The second is their journey to Bethlehem. And the third is the one the magi make back to their homes. And the question with each journey is the same: where do we go to find God?

Let's begin by considering the magi's first journey, to Jerusalem. Looking back, I realise that many years ago, I made a journey to my own Jerusalem. It was the journey that brought me here to this capital city of London. Like others before me, I came to London looking for work and looking for love: hoping to find a satisfying job and hoping to find a life partner. The day after I arrived in London, I travelled on the tube to Westminster, here in the centre of town. Emerging from the tube station, I looked out onto the street. And as I looked out, there was Her Majesty the Queen being driven past in a horse-drawn, golden carriage. You can imagine my astonishment at such a sight. And you can perhaps understand me thinking that I really had arrived at the heart of things; that this was where life's dreams could be fulfilled.

I imagine that the magi felt this way as they arrived in Jerusalem: that they'd arrived at the heart of things. And they too may've thought:

Jerusalem is where life's dreams are fulfilled. But it didn't take the magi long to discover that what they were looking for wasn't in Jerusalem. Instead they'd stumbled upon an over-controlling, insecure monarch who terrified his people; and they'd found religious leaders who seemed to know the answers, but wouldn't make the short journey to a nearby village to test out their learning. Likewise, it didn't take me long after that trip into Westminster to discover that being at the heart of things in London didn't fulfil my deep longings. Instead I found that this crowded city accentuated my loneliness, and could be a difficult and dark place to be.

Like the magi, we each make a journey to the place we think is going to be at the heart of things. I wonder where your Jerusalem has been. Where's the place where you thought some of your deepest longings would be met? Only for the reality to prove a disappointment, and for you to find that you were mistaken. In identifying that place, you're drawing close to the magi's first journey, their journey to Jerusalem – the place where they *thought* they'd find God.

The magi discovered that there was only so far their own searching after God could take them. That search took them to Jerusalem, but it didn't bring them a meeting with God. They needed something more – a revelation. Such a revelation came from searching the Jewish Scriptures. There they discovered that, all along, God was intent on being revealed to them. But not in the place they'd expected. They now had to make another journey, on a road less travelled, to a place they hadn't planned to visit: they had to travel to Bethlehem. Would this make all the difference?

Thinking of the magi's second journey, I recognise that I made a journey to what proved to be my own Bethlehem, when I left school at 18 years old. I'd planned a trip from England to Australia. I'd originally thought of going to Sydney or to Melbourne. Instead I found myself on a much less travelled road to a small Australian town called Kyabram. You're unlikely to have heard of Kyabram, let alone to have been there. It's not on any tourist route. But it was the home of the O'Brien family, with whom my grandmother had a distant connection. So I arrived in Kyabram, and found a family with five children. The youngest but one of these was an 8-year-old girl. And she was dying of a rare wasting disease. In the midst of her death, among the O'Brien family, I learnt what love was. I found a new kind of love – a love grounded in the reality of God. I'd arrived in Kyabram convinced there was no God. But among the O'Brien family, I met God. And so I left Kyabram knowing that God is real. I'd discovered that God can be encountered in human relationships. And also, in the midst of death, the death of a child. I'd travelled to Australia looking to broaden my experience. To my surprise, I left Kyabram overwhelmed: for I'd found God.

This is the second journey taken by the magi, that wasn't in their plans. They'd expected that Jerusalem would be the place of meeting God. But they took a road less travelled to Bethlehem, to what was then a back-water village, like Kyabram. There, in the person of an infant child living with his family, a holy family, the magi found God; and they were overwhelmed with joy.

What's been your Bethlehem, I wonder. What's been the place where you've found God, but hadn't expected to? It could even have been here at All Saints. I'm reminded of a conversation with George. For years, George has been coming to his parish church once a year, to one of the festival services. After one such service, we got into conversation. George revealed that he'd been through a tough period when his wife had abandoned him for someone else. He'd then faced a number of personal and family difficulties. After we'd been chatting a while, George asked if he could share something that had happened to him, during the service. "You may not believe this," he told me as I sat there with my dog collar on, "but I met with God." He continued, "I was sitting there in the service, and I looked up, and there was the sun streaming through the East window, and the sun's rays were lighting up the choir's hair as they sang. And I had this overwhelming sense that it's going to be alright." What George conveyed wasn't some superficial sense that things would be OK; but rather, that at a deep level he could now relax and trust that his life was held by God; that, whatever difficulties he faced, it would ultimately be alright. This was a profound encounter with God. I knew that because two months later George wrote to say thank you for the conversation. He was grateful that someone had believed him when he said he'd found God during a service. George hadn't expected it. But his parish church had become his Bethlehem, a place where he was overwhelmed with God.

See if you can identify where your Bethlehem has been: a place where you've found God, when *you* weren't expecting it. And as you do so, you'll be joining in the second journey made by the magi, travelling the road less travelled to find God in Bethlehem.

The last we hear of the magi is this: "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." We hear nothing more of them. But what we know is that they made a third journey: the journey back home, to the places they'd come from. Perhaps you've made a similar journey at some point over the Christmas season. Maybe it was nothing but a joy to be reunited with family. Maybe all your gifts were received with delight; and, just as importantly, were received with genuine appreciation for you, the giver. Maybe you had a chance to share all the deepest things on your heart, and to know that you'd been heard and understood. And so you rejoiced at being part of such a family. Was that the experience of the magi on returning home, do you think?

Or perhaps it was a different story. Perhaps they found that all the gifts they'd brought home failed to hit the mark. Maybe they found that other family members were quick to point out their old faults and failings. Perhaps they found that each time they tried to speak, the old buttons were pressed, and the all-too-familiar tensions sprang to life. Maybe they never even came close to sharing the most important story that they had to tell: how they'd met with God in Bethlehem. Well, if you've tasted any of that over a Christmas period, then you've entered into the magi's third, and most difficult journey – the journey back to one's own country, back to one's own people. It's a place where you can find yourself overwhelmed with despair, feeling stuck like an old, scratched LP that keeps playing the same few bars of sad music. A place where you can't imagine finding God.

If the magi found themselves in this darker place upon their return home, then maybe another night came, maybe years later. A night when some of them were reunited together, outside, around a small fire. And as one of them looked up at the night sky, she said: "Do you remember that bright star? You know: that vibrant, glittering star that led us all the way to Bethlehem?" And one of her fellow travellers said: "Yes, I remember. And do you remember, when we entered the family home, how the infant boy was standing there clutching his mother's knee?" And another picked up the story, "And do you remember, how the child looked at us, and smiled so broadly? My heart was ready to burst at that moment. And suddenly I knew. I knew that it would be alright. I remember now: it wasn't a dream."

And that's when you remember George. And you remember how George travelled to Bethlehem and found God in the midst of Jerusalem, even in his local parish church, and it wasn't just a dream.

So where do we go to find God? We find God in our journeys to Jerusalem, in the midst of our mistaken hopes and misplaced expectations, as we listen for the revelation that God has for us. We find God in our journeys to Bethlehem, in those special places of meeting with God, that we'd not expected, but which God had always planned for us. We find God as we travel back to the place where we started, to the people and places we call family and home, learning to know them for the first time. We find God as we discover what George found and what the sage expressed, that all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. We find God because the Christ child has come, amidst an ordinary family, and we too can be overwhelmed with joy.