

Sermon Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

A star to follow – the satnav of its day. There has been much written about the star, the star that had recently appeared, that travelled through the sky and that came to rest over Bethlehem. The star could have been a comet.

Chinese records indicate that the comet of 5BC which was a tailed comet could well have been the star seen by the wise men. In the east in the morning sky, but by the time they had reached Jerusalem two months later it had moved round to the south. Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem, so as they approached Bethlehem the comet could well have appeared over Bethlehem.

The 'stopping over' the town could have been the tail of the comet rising up vertically from its head giving the impression that it was over a particular place.

There were other astrological events in the previous years that may have peaked the interest of the wise men and that according to their understanding a significant king was about to be born in Israel and so on seeing this star they set out on their journey.

So they set out on their journey, not really knowing where they were going, how long it might take, where it might take them, they were almost certainly travelling with others for safety, perhaps merchants – they were unlikely to be regular travellers.

What if the three wise men had been three wise women? Well they would have asked for directions and arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought a casserole and given the child much more practical gifts.

The name given to the wise men was Magi, originally a Median tribe – part of the Empire of the Persians.

They became men of holiness and wisdom. These Magi were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. They were astrologers.

They believed that they could foretell the future from the stars and they believed that a man's destiny was settled by the star under which he was born.

Epiphany – manifestation of Christ, Christ revealed, revealed to the Gentiles.

The Wise men, the Magi were Gentiles and came seeking the child born to be king of the Jews, to pay homage. When they saw the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy - at the thought of coming close to the one who born to be king of the Jews.

I wonder when you have been overwhelmed with joy? Maybe spending time with the grand children.....

So the first visitors to the baby Jesus were those shepherds – those on the edge of society and the second were Gentiles from the East.

Clearly their visit to Herod with hindsight was a rather big mistake, were they models of wisdom?

And had God not warned them in a dream, they may well have gone back to Herod.

It feels as though the wise men were on a pilgrimage, I think we are often on a pilgrimage, or lots of little pilgrimages, life is a pilgrimage – a journey – we do not always know the way.....

I think coming forward to the altar to receive the body and blood of Our Lord is a pilgrimage that is one of the reasons I particularly enjoy coming to the high altar – it is something about the journey, how do we feel.....

Sometimes there are those who journey with us for part of the way and their

guidance, their help, their instruction,  
their support for us along the way, guide  
us.

A group of us journey on an annual  
pilgrimage to Walsingham in Norfolk –  
known as England's Little Nazareth. For  
me it is a wonderful place, a special place,  
I asked some fellow pilgrims to describe  
Walsingham in just a couple of words:  
unique, tranquil, holy, a thin place – a thin  
place between earth and heaven.....I  
think that says it for me.

So back to the Magi with their gifts they  
opened their treasure chests, in the  
pictures or the nativity plays they are just  
carrying the gifts! So the gifts were all  
highly valued in ancient times,

The gold the gift for a king – Gold the king of metals, is the fit gift for the king of men.

Frankincense is the gift for a priest, it was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for mankind.

The Latin word for priest is pontifex which means bridge builder. The priest is the one who builds a bridge between mankind and God. This is what Jesus did, he opened the way to God.

Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. Myrrh a perfume used to embalm the bodies of the dead.

In the Follow the Star reflections of the last few days, which seemed to fit in, it said:

Treasures are not always physical; gifts cannot always be touched. Each of us has gifts and talents within us and each of us can make an offering of our own. Our gifts are part of our own story in our work, our homes and our communities. Often the smallest thing that we do can make a difference to someone.

So as we journey on our pilgrimage may we recognise and share our gifts, for what better day to reflect on this than the first Sunday of the new year – the new decade.

And in a few minutes when we journey to pay homage and hold out our hands to receive the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ may we be overwhelmed

with joy at this most precious gift given  
for each of us. Amen.