

Sermon – Sunday 5th January 2020 – 9.30 am

Happy New Year! I am so pleased that we still have the Christmas tree up, because I need just a little more time to rest with Christmas. What about you? Have the decorations been put away for another year? I wonder when it felt like Christmas was actually over? Or are you able to keep hold of the season for just a little longer? I don't know whether you were up on Wednesday morning, New Year's Day, but it seemed like a ghost town. Of course I don't exactly live on a public highway, but it felt as though everyone was hunkered down, holding on to the last remnants of holiday time before the return to work.

This morning, though, is an opportunity to return to the crib scene, to the visit of the wise men, or magi, and see how the scene might shape our lives for the year to come. And I want to view and experience the scene from two perspectives.

We'll start with the wise men. They may have been Zoroastrian priests, neither kings nor wise men. Maybe they earned the title wise men because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology. They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Saviour.

And so these priests follow the star to Bethlehem, the place of Jesus's birth. They kneel down and pay him homage, recognising his divinity and kingship. The Magi give Jesus three gifts. Gold is a sign of kingship, long associated with the gods; frankincense represents wisdom; and myrrh is a sign of long life and healing. Frankincense was and still is a costly incense and myrrh was a prized perfume. These gifts were usually given to a king or a person with high status.

Matthew's purpose in telling this story – and it's worth remembering that it only appears in Matthew's gospel – is to present Jesus as the expected king of both Jews and Gentiles. The gifts would have reminded readers of those given to King Solomon. Jesus is presented not only as superior to King Herod, but also superior to Solomon. He is, indeed, the incarnated Son of God.

But while Matthew had a purpose in telling the story, it continues to speak to us today. This is surely a story of hope. Of possibility. Of how we recognise God with us, and what we do as a result. The magi show us what it looks like to believe. They have a clear sense of purpose. And what I admire so much is that they are unencumbered by their own wants, desires or petty jealousies. They know that in Jesus they will meet something extraordinary. They bring gifts knowing that what they will receive will far outweigh what they bring. With their eyes fixed on God, they forget themselves, and when they arrive, they kneel and adore.

The other perspective I want to consider is that of King Herod. He is introduced at the outset, because this is "the time of King Herod". Already we sense a power that cannot last. After all, if this is the time of King Herod, his influence is time limited. And sure enough, as soon as he hears of the birth of Jesus, he is frightened. He senses a potential threat to his power. Not only that, though. His fear is shared by all Jerusalem, because they know what Kings do when they are afraid.

So what does Herod do? His first action is to call together his leaders to gather information. Contrast that for a moment with the magi, who set out in hope. Herod's legitimacy depends on keeping

people around him. It is a worldview dependent on power, control and fear. And, of course, subterfuge. Because when he discovers where Jesus has been born, he approaches the magi in secret to discover when the star appeared. He asks them to bring word of where they find him in order that he can pay homage, though of course his intentions are far more sinister. Indeed, although we are spared the last part of the story in today's reading, when the magi do not return to Herod, he decides to kill all children in and around Bethlehem who are two or under.

The reason that I want us to consider today's gospel reading from these two perspectives is because I think they can inform us in our lives. And at the start of a New Year, it can be helpful to think about how we hope to travel for the coming year.

You may be wondering what the story of Herod has to say to any of us. But if you're anything like me, you are driven by different things at different times. Let's be clear, I think we all hope that we're not like Herod. But neither are most of us without the capacity to be fearful; to envy others; to want influence if not power. I wonder how often our capacity for joy is diminished by other factors. Sometimes they are unavoidable. Life has its share of challenges. Sometimes we have good reason for fear or anxiety.

But sometimes, instead of Herod, we can look towards the magi... and they really can give us hope. They recognised the birth of Jesus as something positive, and unlike Herod they knew that it needn't diminish them. Of course we don't know any more of their story. It is unlikely that they met Jesus and were not changed. And given all that we know about Jesus's life, meeting him was unlikely to be a guarantee of an easy life.

What I see in the magi at the crib scene is their capacity for selfless love. And as we move into the New Year, I wonder whether we might take a lesson from the magi. We don't know what the coming year will hold, but let's travel hopefully. Let's place our trust in God. And let's seek to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Amen