

St James' Church, Weybridge

Eve of Epiphany, Friday 5th January 2023 – 12th night celebration

Today's Readings

First Reading Isaiah 60:1-6

The prophet foretells a better time, for the light of a new generation, for all the earth and peoples, nations and rulers, has come. For what purpose? To proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Gospel Matthew 2:1-12

The coming of Gentile Magi, the direction of the star, the gifts for the Messiah: all for the worship of the newborn king. Yet the clash between light and dark, praise and fear, foreshadow the end of the Gospel even in its beginning.

HOMILY *"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:10)*

So, what star do you follow? In opening of the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that God made the stars (Gen 1:16). A couple of weeks ago, when walking to church one evening I was very blessed to be able to see the stars on a cold and frosty evening. Twinkling above our illuminated church tower I could just about make out the constellation Orion. To the naked eye on a clear night, away from light pollution one can see several thousand stars, but in our galaxy alone there are estimated to be 100 thousand million stars. It is almost too many to comprehend and goodness me has God been busy creating!

Looking up at the night sky with our own church star shining above Churchfields, I found myself reflecting upon stars. I know the display of lights around our Church this past month have brought great joy and happiness to many. They have lit a pathway to the church door, just as the star of Bethlehem inspired the journey of the Magi to meet the newborn King in Bethlehem.

So, on this Epiphany eve, I have a question for you; what star do you follow? Yes, there are stars everywhere! Not simply in the sky – we may think of star signs, celebrity culture, politics, television series, music, social media such as Facebook streams and family updates - there is so much more I could add to this list! What star do you follow?

In tonight's Gospel reading we are told Magi from the East followed a star which led them to the infant Christ. Clearly this star had important meaning, indeed it did lead them to find a king. Perhaps they were scholars as well as astrologers, who knew the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel, who became famous in both the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires, whilst the Jews were in captivity there several hundred years earlier.

They may also have known of the great prophet Isaiah (or one of the three!) who pointed forward several hundred years to the birth of a child who would unite God and his people – the Emmanuel. Remember the words of the prophet: *'Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.'* And...

'A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.' (Isaiah 60: 3, 6)

These Wise astrologers have noticed something in the sky – and they choose to follow the light of this bright star or comet. It leads them first to the local King – but Herod was clearly not the person

they were looking for, so onward they travel to Bethlehem; a small-town set on a ridge in the mountains south of Jerusalem, surrounded then, as today, by fields where shepherds watch over their sheep.

There was no light pollution then – looking up into the night sky above Bethlehem 2000 years ago, the stars would have been dazzling.

Here the star stops and the real ‘light in the darkness,’ the one of whom the prophets had spoken, the young boy Jesus is revealed. This is the meaning of Epiphany! Bethlehem itself has quite a famous tradition in the bible. In the Old Testament, it was the home of Ruth and Boaz, and it was the birthplace of King David, who, in the minds of the people of Israel, was their greatest and most revered King and leader.

For them there was only one King greater than David and that person was still to come. We believe that person is Jesus, born in the city of David, Bethlehem. The Magi offer their three gifts that represent Gold for royalty, Incense for worship and prayer and myrrh of suffering and royal embalming. So, the Magi followed a star to find a king and to welcome him with gifts. But Jesus is very much unwelcome by the mighty in the world and feared by King Herod. So the Magi are warned to leave by a different path and Mary, Joseph and the child must flee as refugees to Egypt for safety. Not everyone will follow the star to Jesus, but many do, starting with his mother Mary. He is the star that so many had waited for, and that billions of people have followed ever since. Jesus is born to be our star and to lead us deeper in our relationship with God.

According to the Church of England this is 12th night, although much of Christendom thinks it is tomorrow, the 6th January, the feast of the Epiphany. Either way, it is time to take down our decorations and lights, and our stars and put them away. Yet spiritually, Epiphany is just beginning, so our High Altar Crib will remain a few weeks longer, as we ponder further what it means to follow Jesus, the revelation to enlighten the nations, the true light for our lives.

Tonight, on your way home, you may just be able to catch a glimpse of a few stars above – and not the star above our car park / Parish Centre entrance, which shines out for this last time this season! Next time you do catch sight of a star up in the sky, just pause to think for a moment about that first Epiphany night. Jesus is born for you – to lead you into a new relationship with God who made you and the very stars of heaven above you. The enormity of that theological gift is almost beyond our comprehension, but it is at the heart of our faith.

Thank you for everything you have done and been, to help here in Weybridge this past festive season which has brought so much joy and inspiration to many. We pray the impact of our worship and festivities will be felt in the year to come as our church continues to shine with the brightness of Christ’s light. So, what star do you follow? Now, in a New Year we are called to follow Jesus into the darkness, which means giving up some of the other stars that are out there, which is hard. We are called to follow Him in faithfulness.

To follow Jesus in 2024 will mean making a choice to prioritize the worship of God over the other stars that shine brightly but don’t lead us deeper in faith. The prophets foretold that choice. The Magi made that choice. Mary and Joseph were obedient– they too followed Jesus – in Mary’s case right to the foot of the Cross. What about you and your journey of faith this New Year? For the truth of the Incarnation is simple, wonderful and marvelous! God is involved in the world and each of our lives and we can choose to follow the star that is Jesus. In return he requires our commitment and time. Following his light leads to eternal life and it leads to our salvation. So, what star do you follow? Amen.

Fr Damian Harrison-Miles, January 2024.