

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Epiphany Sunday – 3rd January 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder if you saw it. On the shortest day, just after sunset, through a sea mist high above the city, the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. This astronomical event, sometimes referred to as the 'great conjunction', looks like a star of unusual brightness. Although it happens every twenty years, the one in December was closest to the earth for four hundred years and the closest observable conjunction for eight hundred years. The Renaissance astronomer Kepler thought it possible that the Star of Bethlehem might have been a sighting of the 'great conjunction'.

Whatever the origin of the Star of Bethlehem, it was unusual enough to cause the Magi to set out on their journey. We don't know much about the wise men. St Matthew tells us they were from the East – Persia or Arabia – and they were apparently astronomers. Since medieval times the tradition still celebrated with enthusiasm in Spain and Latin America identified them with the kings which the Old Testament prophets had foretold would come and pay homage to Israel when its fortunes were restored – as in our reading from Isaiah this morning, with its reference to kings coming 'to the brightness of your dawn' and the wealth of nations being offered in gifts of gold and frankincense.

At one level, the Magi represent the homage paid to the infant Jesus by strangers. As such, they represent us. Like us, for all their wisdom, they also travel uncertainly to the manger, in contrast to the shepherds who were given direct instructions on Christmas night from a host of angels. These visitors are more hesitant, less sure of themselves. They know that something compelling is there that needs to be discovered, but they find it difficult to know exactly where to look. I suspect that one reason why the Magi have such enduring appeal is not only who they are but what they do. What they do is to show a set of responses that are very human, the practice of which is beneficial to us.

The Magi begin by responding to mystery. They allow the star to get under their skin and set out to see where it leads them. Responding to mystery, to the sacred, to the intuition of a dimension other than ourselves, is an important part of what makes us understand our place in the universe and become attuned to the sense of a God of love at the heart of it all. We all experience it – the experience of beauty, of transcendence, what has been called ‘the beyond in the midst’. But how often do we explore it? It’s the first thing the Magi did.

The next thing the Magi do is to persevere. They pursue their road across inhospitable terrain and don’t give up until they reach their goal. In doing so they expose themselves to risk. Not only the dangerous journey they embark upon, but also the risk represented by Herod. They use their powers of intelligence to calculate the path of the star, make the not unreasonable assumption that the obvious place to ask about the new born king is in a royal palace, and encounter a tyrant of the first order. The perceived threat which the new born Christ-child represented to Herod meant that, in the Magi’s search

for him, Herod's spotlight is turned on them also. And his fury at being tricked by them has devastating results for the persecution of children in Bethlehem.

When they find the child, at the end of their long search, the Magi are overjoyed, and they kneel down and worship him. This brings us to the heart of their significance. It is their moment of Epiphany.

An epiphany is a moment when an important truth becomes clear – a moment of revelation. In the light of it we are able to understand our past and our future in a different way. For the Magi it is their encounter with the Word made flesh. An epiphany harnesses the capacity which is fundamental to our way of perceiving things: the capacity for wonder.

It is vital for us to pause, in the busyness of our lives, and allow ourselves to be captivated by wonder. Children are good at it, and Jesus pointed out that unless we are able to receive the gifts of God like children, we will miss the significance of the Kingdom. Our capacity for wonder helps us to pay attention to God. The Old Testament also teaches the importance of this. Moses saw the bush burning in the wilderness and it proved to be an encounter with God. The priest-poet R S Thomas wrote of the importance of this reflex for our lives, in his poem *The Bright Field*:

'Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.'

The Magi's response to their moment of epiphany is one which throughout history men and women have had: the response of worship. Aware of the cosmic significance of what they have seen – and cosmology was, after all, their

speciality – aware that they were encountering the very love of God incarnate, and that it was for the whole world, including them - they are ‘overwhelmed with joy’, and they kneel down, and pay homage.

Worship helps us to live thankfully, which in turn helps us to live positively. It also helps us to live outwards, away from our own concerns and preoccupations, more attuned to the needs of others. It’s the dynamic of the two great commandments which Christ bequeathed to us, that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The final response of the Magi is to offer their gifts – gold for royalty, frankincense for holiness, and myrrh for the self-sacrifice of the one they have come to worship. As Christina Rossetti’s carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* asks: what can we give him? On the face of it, we have nothing to offer God, for all that we have we have received from God. Yet as a child does to a parent who has given a gift, the thing we *can* do is express our joy. And we can live thankfully, thoughtfully, kindly on this earth. Christ offers us a gateway of thanksgiving in the gift of himself in the Eucharist, to which our own response is thanks and praise. The response of the Magi was to worship. And it must be ours too. For the mystery of the Incarnation is that we may approach God knowing we are called, loved, wanted. As St John puts it, ‘to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God’. (John 1.12-13.)

And so the Magi offer us a set of responses that can be life-changing: they open themselves to the sacred, they persevere in their pursuit of it, they take risks in their quest for it, they give thanks when they encounter it and are moved to

worship, and finally they offer in response the finest gifts of which they are capable.

There is one more thing the Magi did. They leave for their own country by another road. The thing about our encounter with this child is that it changes us. We are not the same when we leave. We are spurred by each of our encounters with Christ, to go out and be different from how we came in. We will fail, as we always do. But we won't be the same. For we have caught a vision of what is possible, of a life lived for others and for God, which will not let us go. And that, as we stand on the threshold of a new year – most especially this one, with its many challenges - is a source of hope.

The twentieth century mystic Thomas Merton wrote this:

‘You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.’

That's what the Magi did. May we, through the grace of God, do the same in the weeks and months ahead.

Amen.