

The Visit of the Wise Men

Reading

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] 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,^[b] 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^[c] 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^[d] my people Israel.”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] 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,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] 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.

Sermon

If I have not had a chance to say it to you so far, happy new year and indeed happy new decade!

My hope and prayer for us all is that 2020 will be a good one, that you will be blessed with fruitfulness and with peace.

One thing that is certain for us is that this year and possibly the first half of the twenties will be a time of rapid and great change. If had to describe our current generation one or two words it would probably be fast changing. We are living in a generation that does not want to commit to anything for long before moving on to the next new thing. The Christmas decorations may seem to go up earlier every year but they come down earlier as well. This year I know of some people who took some of their decorations down on Boxing day. So much for the twelve days of Christmas!

For the avoidance of doubt, if yours are still up they should come down today, twelfth night. Tomorrow, being the 6th of January, marks the official start of Epiphany, and is the day when we celebrate Jesus being visited by the wise men from the East. We just happen to be celebrating a day early in Church this morning.

Our reading this morning reminds us that the call of Jesus should provoke a response in us. It may be a response of journey towards him in wonder and the desire to know more, as it was for the shepherds and the magi. It may be a response of fear and rejection as it was for Herod. Either way it should cause us to respond with some form of action and hopefully it will be a response driven by love and wonder rather than fear and rejection.

We love, BECAUSE God first loved us, loved us so much that he became one of us and died on the cross to restore our broken relationship with him. Our response to that love (if it is a magi's or shepherd's response) is to want to journey with Jesus, to follow in his footsteps, take up our cross and follow him.

And that means being ready and willing to give all our heart, all our soul all our mind and all our strength in loving him AS he first loved us.

This is not achieved in one hour a week in Church on Sunday morning. Nor is it achieved in a vague new year's resolution that may last for a few days or weeks. And it is not something that like Christmas for most of the secular world we spend a few weeks building up to and then as soon as we arrive we pack it all away again, forget it and move on to the next shiny thing.

This is why we will be spending the season of Epiphany looking at discipleship. Normally my sermons during this season look at the way in which Jesus is revealed to us and reveals himself to us as the Son of God. This year I want to look at what our own personal response should be to that revelation.

In two of our readings over the coming weeks we will hear how Jesus called his first disciples to follow him, and how they immediately did. But what is or was a disciple?

There was discussion in the news this week of the definition of an “ethical vegan”. According to the courts, to be an ethical vegan is more than just a lifestyle choice about what food to eat. It is an embedded set of “philosophical beliefs” that control the way you relate to the rest of the world. In other words, it is a fully developed religion. If you didn’t hear this or read about this in the news don’t worry. But if you did, then that discussion may help you to understand what the difference was between a true disciple and a mere follower in the time of Jesus.

Anybody could follow a rabbi’s teaching, or even several rabbi’s, picking and choosing the bits of teaching that suited them and ignoring the rest.

The word disciple, which we usually translate as follower or student and the word discipline have the same root. To be a disciple meant you attached yourself to one particular rabbi and you committed to living according to his rules, his lists of what behaviour was allowed and what was prohibited according to his interpretation of the Torah, the Law. When you agreed with a rabbi that you could be his disciple and live totally and exclusively according to his rules. This was called taking on the rabbi’s yoke.

Jesus said “my yoke is easy and my burden is light”.

Jesus did not actually COMMAND us to do very much. He told us the most important commandments were to LOVE God with all our heart mind soul and strength and to LOVE our neighbour as ourselves.

So we will be looking at what it means to Love in this way. He told us to go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them into the Church of Christ, and teaching them how to live as Christians. So we will be looking at how we do that.

Jesus’ yoke may be easy, but it is also costly and it requires life-long commitment. If we are to be his disciples then we must take up his yoke, and his yoke is the way of the cross, it is the way love and the way of self-sacrifice.

A couple of days ago I was with a couple talking about a future baptism for their daughter. While I was there a neighbour “popped in” to see the new baby. The magi in today’s reading from Matthew did not just hop in a taxi and “pop over” to see Mary and her new baby. It was a long and probably dangerous journey. Their journey was probably weeks in the planning and months in execution.

They didn't have in-flight meals included in the ticket. Their attendants, servants and bodyguards, and animals would have needed food and provisions. It was not just a long hard and dangerous journey but an expensive one. They didn't just turn up, put their hands in their pockets, and find they just happened to have some spare gold and frankincense and myrrh left over, They chose these gifts in advance and brought them as a deliberate of worship and the costs they incurred were willingly and joyfully made.

Being a disciple of Christ means giving our time, effort, money and love in his service. And it means prayerful and planned giving of the first and best of them, not giving up whatever dregs are left over when everything else in life is done and finished with.

So today we are beginning a journey of exploration into what it means to be a disciple of Christ in today's world. And we shall finish in five weeks time with an act of commitment to discipleship in our main service for all who want to join in. But before we do that, we need to spend time making ourselves ready. In his letter to the Philippians Paul said that although Jesus was God he EMPTIED himself, becoming obedient even to death on a cross, and he challenged the Philippians to be of the same mind. The question I want you to take away and prayerfully consider this week is this:

Are you ready to come with me on a journey to explore how we too can be of the same mind, and how you personally should respond to the one who loved you so much that gave everything and died for you?

Amen