



Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on 4th January 2026

Readings: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”. T.S. Eliot (1927) *Journey of the Magi*

We’ve been rather snowed under with imagery and symbols over recent weeks as the advent story has become the Christmas story and as we noted earlier in thinking about the three wise men who may well not have been three, much has become adopted and adapted into popular culture, along with Santa Clause and his reindeer, Christmas trees and all the other paraphernalia of the season, sometimes as entertainment and to a considerable degree its understandably intended to provide some insulation against the coldness and bleakness of winter. Inaccurate as it may be as a meteorological reference in relation to the middle East, somehow standing together singing ‘in the bleak mid-winter’ around a Christmas tree on a village green while drinking hot mulled wine has a comforting familiarity about it that can bring people together and create bonds that are real and help to fend off the cold.

There is a positive aspect to all of this, along with the giving and receiving of gifts, that can genuinely lift the spirits.

But if we are in any way empathic, we also acknowledge that there is a shadow side to this too. As the intensity of the preparation and then the celebration increases, so can the sense of loneliness that many feel at Christmas increase. Some may be marking it for the first time without a much-loved partner or experiencing alienation from their family or simply feeling lonely and isolated. Here in Downing Place we have responded to that by offering the opportunity for a differently focused time in the Longest Night service held here on December 21st So we know well that the cascade of images, lights and glitter can be something of a two-edged sword.

And from a different perspective, I always find myself thinking, every year, of that Christmas Day during the first world war when German and British soldiers got up out of their trenches to exchange presents and played football in no man’s land and then the next day everything went back to what tragically still passes for normal.

Surely we might think there ought to be more to it than just the glitter of Christmas Day.

The challenge can be to look at this pile of images and conflation of stories, as I suggested earlier, afresh. Perhaps being able to see that the piling together in order to emphasize the positive aspect of the stories and the celebrations may also actually obscure things that can be valuable, especially as we both look back and look forwards.

Nativity scenes that put the shepherds and angels and the inn keeper together with the animals and inevitably the three wise men, may send in one sense a familiar and hopeful message to some degree but it doesn’t really invite us to dig deeper unless we are especially curious.

So it’s not a huge jump to ask the question: why does Matthew include the story of the wise men but not the shepherds? And why does Luke include the Angels and the shepherds but not the wise men? Some may simply say that it was to do with the availability of sources, but that really misses the point.

Deal with the stories separately, and we may be more likely to want to know more and find new angles as a result. I can still recall the aha! moment I had when I learned about the social status of shepherds being on the edge of society, people looked down on for not fulfilling all the

requirements of the law, and the implication therefore of the angels announcing the birth of the Messiah to them and not to the rulers in Jerusalem.

And is Matthew saying more or less the same or something different? I think we've struggled more with that one having been sidetracked by the amount of time and energy that has gone into trying to prove there was a supernova or a comet at just the right time in order to account for the star. Then there's that slogan I've seen on church notice boards occasionally that says, 'Wise men followed Jesus, they still do', and that's about as far as it often goes. But think a little more into what Matthew may well be getting at. These emissaries from Persia, whether priests or mystics but almost certainly not Kings, go quite naturally to the seat of power in Jerusalem expecting probably to participate in a royal celebration of pomp and ceremony where they will formally present their gifts, from one kingdom to another as it were. Instead it's a very different experience: King Herod tries to enlist their aid in trying to track down this threat to his power, and in the end, it leads to him ordering the murder of all the male children under the age of two, partly because the wise men don't go back to Jerusalem to tell him where to find the infant. They recognise what God is doing and are still being led by God, despite the fact that they are not worshipers of the God of Israel, who leads them back to their own country by a different route.

There is much to think of there by way of implications, but you have to dig to find it and recognise that what appears to lay on the surface is not the whole of it by any means. The story and its context and background need to be explored, as do the implications.

And all of this is in the early stage of the Christian year with much more to come as we follow the accounts of Jesus' life and work and the relationships he has with so many different people and where eventually it leads and that can offer us a principle by which to live, that so much of the nature of faith is about exploration, pilgrimage if you like, about digging in and uncovering implications and not being content with easy superficial answers.

Of course the Christian year is recursive, all of which assist the ongoing deepening of faith so that we might grasp the meaning behind the words of T.S. Elliot which has given my reflection its title.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

I might venture one mild disagreement with T.S. Elliot, if such a thing is permitted; which is that it's not that we might know the place for the first time, because that might suggest we didn't really know it at all to start with, but rather that we might know the place afresh each time we return, discovering new angles of understanding finding new enthusiasm to continue the exploration and fresh commitment to live by what we have discovered.

And another perspective on God's gifts to us is that God calls us into a community of faith because our exploring is something we do best together.