



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Readings: *Ephesians 3.7-13 & Matthew 2.1-12*

Epiphany

The Bible gives us some unforgettable narratives of the birth of Jesus: angels, shepherds, and magi. People have gradually embellished them with donkeys and camels, stables and, if *Love Actually* is to be believed, the lobster that was present at the birth of Jesus. <sup>1</sup> None of these accretions particularly concern me. Like the Biblical material, if they enable us to think about ‘the Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us, full of grace and truth’, <sup>2</sup> then that’s OK.

Matthew’s tale of the Magi is a fine example of these extras. Despite what our Christmas cards show, it doesn’t tell us how many visited from the east, nor that Jesus’s global importance is proven by one magus being European, one Asian, and another African. Nor does it say they rode camels and were kings named Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior, and that their gifts had specific meanings: gold for a monarch, frankincense for one to be worshipped, and myrrh for one who would suffer. And yet these vignettes can enhance our understanding, if they inspire our critical reflection.

Etymologically, there is reason enough to interpret the word *magoi* as ‘scholars’, ‘astrologers’, perhaps even people of a priestly caste. So, ‘wise ones’ works. Moreover, their wisdom is clear from their apparent reading of the stars, even if they weren’t AlphaBetaKappa astrologers, from their determined search for ‘the child who has been born king of the Jews King of the Jews’, and from paying him homage. They knew, these wise ones, that everything had changed, they were ‘no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation’. <sup>3</sup> Maybe that was their ultimate wisdom.

Now, if they were wise, how might they inspire you and me to be wise today? Are there ideas that might be wisdom for followers of Jesus in our day and age? At the start of 2025, I’d like to offer the thoughts of some contemporary wise ones who visited the manger of my mind this Christmas, grateful for their wisdom in these febrile, fractious, and frightening times.

First, **gratitude**. I am conscious that a phrase like ‘febrile, fractious, and frightening times’ casts a melancholy pall over this New Year. I was helped, therefore, to read recently the upbeat thoughts of one who had just cause for melancholia. Simon Boas was a respected British aid worker. Aged forty-six, he was diagnosed with throat cancer, and died in July last year, aged just forty-seven. His demise was not what he envisaged, and is a real bereavement for Aurelie, his widow. But surprisingly, Simon Boas’ legacy is a resounding call to gratitude. In his book, which he acknowledges is slightly precociously entitled, *A beginner’s guide to dying*, Simon Boas urges upon us, in our personal worlds’ mystery and mess, and in the international world’s maelstrom and mayhem, that we don’t forget to be grateful. I get his point. At least, I do as a middle-aged thriving Western European man, though I think I would feel differently if I were one of present-day Sudan’s twenty five million victims of famine. Nonetheless, Simon Boas still has a point for me, and perhaps he does for you, too. He puts it like this: ‘We have won the lottery in life: both to exist at all and to live in the greatest period of abundance in the history of the world. .... Our glasses are half full, or perhaps even fuller, and, when we remember this, we should be filled with exuberance and gratitude.’ <sup>4</sup>

Secondly, **enquiry**. I profoundly believe that spiritual wisdom is an especially luscious fruit of being inquisitive, of asking questions. I do not belittle unquestioning faith. It works for many, as they contentedly sing, ‘faith believes nor questions how’, <sup>5</sup> but it doesn’t work for me. Donald Hilton <sup>6</sup> used to suggest that a valid symbol of Christianity, alongside the cross and the ampersand, was a question

<sup>1</sup> Curtis, Richard 2003 *Love Actually* London: Working Title; Paris: StudioCanal

<sup>2</sup> John 1.14

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, T. S 1888-1965, from the poem, *Journey of the Magi* (1927)

<sup>4</sup> Boas, Simon, 2024 *A Beginner’s Guide to Dying* Swift Great Britain: Swift Press page 50

<sup>5</sup> from the hymn, *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus* by William Chatterton Dix 1837-98 CH4 445.2

<sup>6</sup> Donald Hilton, 1922-2012 Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church 1993-94. His address began, ‘God is very big.’

mark. I was, and remain, grateful, not because I want to raise questions *en route* to unbelief, but because, for some of us, rigorous enquiry is quite the opposite from undermining of faith, and instead allows that exploration which leads to discovery, discovery which itself can be a gateway to renewed or deepened trust. The questioner is not taking faith and its Scriptures *less* seriously but *more*, not undermining belief, but undergirding it.

Thirdly, **choice**. The wisdom born of enquiry often leads us to realise we face choices. In Deuteronomy, fresh from leading the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt, Moses has grasped this: ‘See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.’<sup>7</sup> A little later, Joshua, having taken the people into the Promised Land of Canaan, offers a similar challenge, crowning it by saying, ‘as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is the other big choice, not just at a New Year but every day of our lives, however long they be: to love or to hate. In the fifth century before Christ, Evenus, a Greek poet, wrote: ‘If hate is pain, and love is pain, I would opt for the pain that does me most good.’<sup>9</sup>

That is not a *bad* choice, is it? But is it the best: to opt for what does me most good? I conclude that the wisdom I am offered by kneeling enquiringly at the manger of Christ is not to opt for what does *me* most good, but rather to do what serves the *common* good. It’s the love of neighbour, and actually of stranger, too.<sup>10</sup> If Jesus is the model for our own wisdom, then R. S. Thomas expresses it well. Depicting the Trinity looking at the state of the world, where ‘a bare tree saddened the sky’, Thomas has Jesus say to the Father and the Spirit, ‘Let me go there.’ Jesus’ was the wisdom that saw need and chose not narcissism but altruism. ‘Love to the loveless shown’.<sup>11</sup>

And finally, this Christmas I read another word of wisdom: **repentance**. Entering 2025, when so much is ‘saddening the sky’, one of the topics so often before us is Safeguarding. As well as guarding against abuse, Safeguarding involves knowing what is the right response to one person’s abuse of another – the right response to perpetrators, to those who are harmed, and to those whose brief includes ensuring adequate Safeguarding processes. From various sides of this debate, we are bidden to be forgiving, because it’s the Christ-like way. Well, no, argues Stephen Cherry, the Dean of King’s College, Cambridge. Forgiveness is not for the perpetrators to request, salving how bad they have come to feel. Nor is it reasonably to be expected of those who have been harmed. His recent book bears a title that sums up half his argument: *Unforgiveable? Exploring the limits of forgiveness*.<sup>12</sup> Stephen Cherry stresses that forgiveness can too often be sought in order to make a perpetrator feel better, whilst leaving the harmed ones feeling yet worse because the pressure to forgive is added to the trauma of being abused. He posits that the truly Christian way of addressing these things is **repentance**. It is that repentance which is about turning away from abusive behaviour, or from ignoring it, and, instead, adopting a new lifestyle that no longer abuses, no longer tolerates, nor tries to explain away the abuse of one by another. Forgiveness, seventy times seven,<sup>13</sup> sounds thoroughly Biblical, but we are urged to ask the challenging question, ‘does forgiveness put anything right for anyone unless it is tied in with repentance?’ Forgiveness is about a state of mind; repentance is about how we behave. Dr Cherry says of repentance: ‘it’s a change process that is appropriate in its own right, not a forgiveness seeking process.’<sup>14</sup>

As we face a New Year at the threshold of which there lies so much that is ‘febrile, fractious, and frightening’, might Stephen Cherry have a word of trenchant value for us in all sorts of contexts, from our personal homes to the parliament houses of countless nations? You see, it’s too easy for

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<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 30.15 and 19a-20

<sup>8</sup> Joshua 24.15

<sup>9</sup> Evenus, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek poet, gathered in the *Garland of Philip*, by Philippus of Thessalonica in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 19.18 (neighbour) and 19.34 (stranger)

<sup>11</sup> from the hymn *My song is love unknown* by Samuel Crossman, 1624-84 RS 207.1.3

<sup>12</sup> Cherry, Stephen 2024 *Unforgiveable? exploring the limits of Forgiveness*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 18.21-35

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* page 206

forgiveness to be about wishing things had been different in the past and regretting that they were not. Repentance, however challenging and hard it is, is about a commitment to make them different in the future by choosing 'the pain' which seeks common good, including the harmed and the harmer.

So, entering 2025 confident of the ampersand, that there is always more of the 'wonderful things' God offers in Jesus, do we not do well to allow the Wisest One to stir in us a wisdom that offers gifts for what we might regard as 'the new dispensation'? Gifts of gratitude, of enquiring and choosing life, new life not just for ourselves, but for others, too.

That, it seems to me, is how we live out what we so enthusiastically sang at the start of the service:

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us –  
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,  
past put behind us, for the future take us:  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.<sup>15</sup>

May it be so, and to God be the glory. Amen

N. P. Uden

5th January 2025

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<sup>15</sup> from the hymn, *Lord, for the years*, by Timothy Dudley-Smith 1926-2024 RS 603.5