



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 7th January 2024

Readings: *Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12*

The Epiphany of the Lord

The Epiphany Sunday text below comes in two parts. The first, in 'Sharing Together' time, followed the reading of the visit of the magi to Bethlehem, with their gifts. Nigel invited the congregation (those of all ages) to consider what they might bring to the manger: something that somehow captures who they are. The more conventional Sermon text then follows.

Sharing Together

At Epiphany, we remember the visit of the wise ones to the manger. Let's put them in position within the nativity set.



The visitors to Jesus' manger brought gifts. Who can tell me what were they?
- Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As part of the carol, *In the bleak midwinter*, Christina Rossetti pictures Mary giving Jesus a kiss. A lovely gesture for those who mean most to us. Christina Rossetti also pictures the shepherds bringing him lambs, and the wise ones 'doing their part'. And then she asks what *she* can bring, answering herself that 'what I can I give him, give my heart'. Rachel Mann suggests that by the word 'heart' Christina Rossetti means 'the very essence of our being';¹ we might bring those things that make us who we are.

So it is that I have brought a fountain pen. And it's not any old fountain pen. This is the pen I inherited from my father, so it means a great deal to me. I brought a pen because I do a lot of writing: sermons, articles, cards and letters – they are at the heart of what I do.



What have you brought? Then people introduced what summed them up, and laid it at the manger. A performer brought a DVD of one of her performances. A geologist, his hammer, but also some music because he is now a singer. A piano student brought her piano book. A granny her pinny, which told of her cooking, and another baker, a piece of Christmas cake, because it symbolises what she does both domestically and as an aid to her professional life. A retired academic brought a research journal, and also the church magazine that he edits. A needlewoman brought a knitting needle, and her woodworking husband, a goblet made from Ash wood, typifying his career. And to one who said they didn't know what they would bring, I had said, 'bring yourself'; that's the essence of who you are.

And so it is that, with Christina Rossetti, I 'give my heart.'

Sermon

2024 has dawned with a New Year's usual mix of challenge and opportunity.

The *challenges* are numerous but somewhere at the top of the list there is how we move beyond the tendency to war that is robbing so many not just of peace, but even more basically of their homes,

¹ Mann, Rachel 2019 *In the bleak midwinter: through Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* Norwich: Canterbury Press page 106

of their livelihoods, and, most heart-rendingly, of their loved ones. As Antony Blinken, the American Secretary of State, puts it during his current mission in the Middle East, ‘there is a strong desire among the majority of people in the region for a future that is one of peace.’² And Amen to that.

And the *opportunities* we face are legion, too. Take Artificial Intelligence. Maybe we regret it. We may resist it. But it’s no more likely to go away than the pocket calculator ... or my use of a fountain pen. Its capacity for instant translation of one language into another is remarkable. At multi-nation peace talks, that is of paramount importance, and AI is making it ever more speedy and accurate. That said, just as there were with the new and clever navigational aids that made trading in slaves easier three hundred years ago, so there remain fundamental questions about AI. Not only are there the ethical ones – how do we use it for the common good rather than the exploitation of some by others? But also, given the capacity of AI to translate directly from and into any combination of a hundred different languages, we face the essential question of *whether that is what we should do*. Philip Sargeant, a linguist with the Open University, highlights how linguistic diversity and multilingualism are ‘fundamental features of the system upon which whole cultures and identities are built.’ He asks, ‘what impact will [doing this] have on society and culture as we know it?’ Alluding to the Bible’s Tower of Babel fable,³ he emphasises that even as we ‘overcome the age old “confusion of languages”’, we must ‘protect the huge variety that characterises our global linguistic culture.’⁴

We could add to these any number of other challenges that face us in 2024, quite apart from the profound responsibility of going to the polls that is placed upon the citizens of more of the world’s nations this year than in any year previously – Bangladesh today, and later USA, Russia, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and, of course, the UK to name but a few.

Amidst this superfluity of challenge and opportunity, it is entirely obvious that we need a super-abundance of wisdom. ‘Where’, we might ask, with the ancients in every generation, ‘where shall wisdom be found?’⁵ Demonstrably, those visitors to the manger were pursuing wisdom. Perhaps they’re labelled wise, precisely because they knew their need of wisdom? Matthew’s inclusion of this finely wrought narrative offers us as sophisticated a meaning of the Christ-child as we could want. The Epiphany Gospel should not be the stuff of infantilising fairy tales, nor of dumbed down theology, less still of sentimental songs. Rather, in these visitors from the East we are offered: people who are *risk-takers* – they came ‘from the East to Jerusalem’; people who are *inquisitive* – ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’; people who are *perceptive* – ‘we observed his star at its rising’; people who are *devout* – we ‘have come to pay him homage’.

Might they, therefore, offer us some help for the wisdom that we need this New Year, even as we offer our heart?

Risk taking

First, wisdom to meet the world’s challenges is rarely to be found in seeking the effortless way out. With the Magi, we take risks that weigh the options and recognise the potential hazards. Then, on the balance of probabilities we pursue a course that intends progress, and peace, and prosperity. We do it as we ponder career choices; we do it at the staging posts of family life – when to have children, how to respond to ageing, and so on; we took such a risk in 2018 when we united Emmanuel and St Columba’s Churches; and there are risks to take in seeking peace, in capitalising on the potential of AI, in electing the leaders of our nations. But not to risk, is never to find wisdom. As was once said, ‘those who aim at nowhere, will surely arrive.’

Inquisitive

Secondly, wisdom to meet the world’s challenges is rarely to be found if we are not inquisitive, asking nothing, reading nothing, exploring nothing. With the Magi, we feed the mind with our

² Antony Blinken, speaking to news outlets as reported on BBC World Service, 7th January 2024

³ Genesis 11

⁴ Sargeant, Philip in *Tower of Babel* an article in *New Scientist* Vol 260 No 3471 30th December 2023 page 19

⁵ Job 28.12

questions and searching, with our journeying, our diversions our experiments. Yes, we will be disappointed; yes, we will make mistakes; yes, we will have to think again. But that research is the route to the discovery; that exploration leads to where wisdom will be found.

Perceptive

Thirdly, wisdom to meet the world's challenges is dependent on taking the road less travelled, on encountering the unexpected, on being ready to be surprised, on 'observing his star at his rising'. Perception is the capacity to see beyond the obvious, and there to discern something new, something of potential and promise. Were the old solutions to be right for the Middle East, they'd have been implemented generations ago, and before such injustice and suffering had taken their toll. With the Magi, today's wise ones have their eyes open, and are as open to fresh insight as they are unrelenting in their search.

Devout

And finally, the Magi of Matthew 2 teach us that wisdom to meet the world's challenges is to be found in a mindset that has a space for God. Apart from their knowledge of the stars, we don't know anything about who the Magi were, where they were from, what they did, or why they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh – though legend and religious tradition have offered innumerable ideas about all that, some of which are really fascinating. But their coming to pay homage to the Christ-child is a clue about the very essence of who they were, suggesting that they were not reliant solely upon their own ingenuity and acuity.

The Bible describes as 'fools' those who 'say in their heart "there is no God"'.⁶ It describes as 'blessed', those who 'know their need of God'.⁷ And then, of course, there is Saint Paul's faith, of which we heard in the Epistle reading. Ephesians might be understood as a summary of Paul's teaching, with the section Tim read as a sort of digression explaining Paul's own ministry, and its particular focus upon Gentiles, indicative of the whole world God loves and to whom God send Jesus, and that not to condemn the word but to save it.⁸ And Paul, too, you see, knows his need of God. He does not spout his own ideas. He is not seeking followers of his own school, or cult. Like John the Baptist before him, he points to Jesus, who accepts us as we are and transforms us into who God would have us be.⁹ Paul's wisdom can be ours: he urges reliance upon what we heard described as 'the boundless riches of Christ' - what Paul elsewhere calls 'the abundant grace of God.' And that is the real wisdom this world needs: to trust in God's infinite and immeasurable grace as we see it in Jesus Christ. That is the good news which the Christian faith feeds into our own lives, onto the world stage, as technology develops increasingly, and as the environment struggles.

It's the good news that God is God, that God's purposes are good, that God's covenant is unbroken and forever shall remain so, that, deserve it though we don't, God will bring all things to completion, until which, tis New Year and every year we are bidden 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God'.¹⁰

That is our hope. And remember, 'hope migrates'.¹¹ It does not leave us where we are, but plunges us into this New Year with a Magi-like readiness to risk, to journey, to discover, and all the time, to worship.

Let that all be so, because of the boundless riches of Christ, Amen.

N. P. Uden

7th January 2024

⁶ Psalm 14.1

⁷ Matthew 5.3 (New English Bible)

⁸ John 3.16f

⁹ John 3.30

¹⁰ Micah 6.8

¹¹ Currie, Thomas W. 2015 *Bread for the Journey: Notes to those preparing for ministry* Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications page 203

