

## **Sermon Epiphany 08/01/2017 Northleach evensong and CAS Café Church**

Is 60: 1-6 and Matt 2: 1-12 'The star and the wise men'

If I asked any of you what a star is, I'm sure that responses would be along the lines of 'a ball of gas, mostly hydrogen and helium, and it's held together by its own gravity'.

And that would be very true.

It's certainly true of the star the wise men saw and followed on their journey.

The word 'star' is used in many different contexts. We speak of 'seeing stars' – not in a good way – when we feel dizzy or are about to faint or in a lot of pain; we earn 'gold stars' by doing something particularly well; at one point 'star charts' for children to elicit or diminish certain behaviours were quite the fashion; and finally, the word 'star' can refer to people. Defining what a star is then becomes a little more complicated. But let's have a go.

People who are described as 'stars' often do things we see as special, as extraordinary, things that not everyone else can do. Stars can reach levels of competence and excellence in areas of music, sports, acting, writing, or a variety of other pursuits, that even their colleagues and peers often do not reach. And that is, I think, another characteristic of human stars: they are only called 'stars' by comparison with other humans. The 'star quality' needs to be recognised by others. This can make others feel distinctly 'un-starry', or even unimportant. But this need for recognition also means that being regarded as a 'star' usually has a time limit. People are 'stars' for a while, ranging from 15 minutes of fame to perhaps years or, in rare cases, decades. Some people are stars for hundreds of years, scientists like Einstein and Marie Curie, composers like Bach and Mozart. And then there is Jesus.... A very rare star indeed, whom we have known about for over two thousand years.

Jesus' star quality certainly bears the characteristics we generally ascribe to stars. He is very special, he did extraordinary things that no-one else could or can do. He was recognised as such by others. But he was not seen as a star by everyone. Some people were – and still are – very unimpressed, threatened even, by his birth. King Herod, for example. It can't be easy for an important king in Judea to be told that another Jewish king, more powerful than him, has been born. Even more so when the wise men turn up, asking to see this child. Jesus' stardom, the wise men believed, had been foretold by the rising of a star.

Matthew's Gospel is known to often refer to Old Testament prophecies, and it does so right here at the beginning. Matthew quotes from the prophecy of Micah 5: from Bethlehem shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel. Herod doesn't like hearing this and devises a sly trick to find out where this challenger, this rival new king, is: he asks the wise men to report back to him. As we know, the wise men are warned in a dream to not do that, and return home without speaking to Herod.

The wise men set off on a journey. We do not know where they came from, we do not know much about them at all. But we do know that when they arrived in Judea they already know that Jesus is a star, someone very special, someone truly unique. They have not even seen Jesus yet, but they are determined, they believe the signs they have seen, they have even brought some pretty unique gifts. I said that Matthew often looks back at prophecies in the past, but the gifts the wise men bring refer to something in the future. The wise men bring gold to signify that Jesus is a king, not just any king, but the King of Kings. They bring frankincense, often used

in worship, to signify that Jesus is and will be worshipped. They bring myrrh, often used to apply to dead bodies, to signify that Jesus will suffer and die.

What is significant in this reading too, is that the wise men are not Jewish. They are Gentiles. And this is another feature of Matthew's Gospel. Although it is regarded as the 'most Jewish' of gospels, and the Old Testament is integral to his understanding and his teaching, Matthew is also the one who shows that other people: Gentiles, the wise men, 'get' who Jesus really is. He is not as exasperated with the non-understanding as Mark is. In Mark's gospel we often find phrases like: do you still not understand? How many times do I need to tell you? Matthew, however, keeps on giving us examples of people who do understand, of whole communities who understand. And for Matthew, communities do not refer to Jewish communities only, but include absolutely everyone. And by having the wise men come to see Jesus first, he shows that other, non-Jewish, communities were anticipating the coming of the Messiah, and that the Messiah came for ALL.

So the wise men followed a star in the sky to a unique and human star. They brought their gifts, they worshipped Jesus. They came to see that which they already believed. Very different from a popular saying 'seeing is believing'. And I have to admit that I do like to see before I believe. To me, it always felt risky to believe, to commit to something unseen. I happily sat on the fence of faith for many years on end. I won't bore you with my faith journey, but I will say that God has his ways to make us listen... I was pushed off the fence, rather harshly after I failed to respond to earlier and more gentle pushes, and then I believed. That 'lightbulb moment', that EPIPHANY, came eventually. Now, like the wise men, I worship and I bring my gifts. Now I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who was foretold to be the King of Kings.

My epiphany, my realising and to a certain level 'knowing' who Jesus really is, came at a later stage in life. For some of us here this may have happened as a child. For others, it may have been very recently. Some of us may wonder whether we've ever experienced an epiphany in that sense. But what matters most is that we are all here, that we are one of those communities who believe that we have seen a star, a sign of something – someone – extraordinary in our lives. We are worshipping together, bringing our gifts like gold, our prayers like frankincense, and our belief in life after death like myrrh. Brothers and sisters, we have seen a star indeed. We have seen the signs, we continue to strive to see them around us every day. We see the light, we continue to pray for it to illuminate our path. We believe that this star is still with us today, and we believe that he continues to inspire and influence our lives. Our star is Jesus.

Amen.