

Psalm 72:1-7; 10-14

Matthew 2 v 1-12

Journey of faith

Can we have too much of a good thing? If we are being honest with ourselves, I think the answer to that is yes. I mean, in the recent past we have had turkey, Christmas puddings, those late nights and Hogmanay. Maybe we feel it's time to draw in, settle down, and not take on anything too demanding until we see signs of spring appearing. I'll bet that some of us may feel that hibernation would be a good idea for this time of year, not to wake up until the sun is shining in the sky, or to be a bit more realistic, the rain is a bit warmer. We could just pull the duvet over our heads and go gently to sleep. But not this morning, please!

Wait until this afternoon at least.! Why not have a total rethink about what you are doing, where you are going, as we journey through 2021, on this first Sunday of Epiphany?

Our reading today would be a familiar one to many of us, I'm sure.

By the leading of a star, the Magi leave their homeland, trek across the desert, and make their way at last to the holy child – before whom they bow, and to whom they present gifts.

Their homeland was probably in modern day Yemen and the Bible in several places, suggests that its gold is special.

Frankincense resin is highly fragrant and is burnt in Jewish, Christian and Islamic worship. Oman and Yemen are reputed to provide the best in the world.

Myrrh, which is the primary ingredient for anointing and embalming oils, comes from trees in the Red Sea area. These origins point to the wise men having come from the south of the Arabian Peninsula across the desert. Now this is a distance of around 1,500

miles – not just a wee trip to the shops, but a major undertaking. A journey like that, in those days would probably have taken around 2 months.

The wise men's journey was certainly a dangerous one. Robbers, illness, and weather to name but a few.

The most dangerous part, I'm sure was when they went to meet Herod. Herod, it has to be said, was a terrible ruler. He could easily outdo many a villain from the James Bond films.

Except for a brief time when the wise men strayed into Jerusalem, they followed the star every step of the way, from the outset of the adventure until journey's end. Or so it would seem.

Wouldn't it be nice if all our journeys, spiritual or otherwise were straightforward?

Things, however, are not always as straightforward – and scripture doesn't always actually tell us or depict what generations of tradition have piously painted into its open spaces.

Matthew's gospel does not, in fact, present to our eyes and ears what the sights and sounds of the season have come to suggest.

To those longing for light, earnestly desiring Epiphany; the drama of salvation in the gospel of Matthew is not what we expect. Whatever Epiphany is, according to Matthew, cannot be captured on the front of a card, or contained in a verse of a carol.

You see, Matthew sees spiritual illumination as a lifelong struggle, a process of demanding, difficult, and altogether daunting spiritual discernment.

There are no obvious cut and dried choices.

The curtain opens with Joseph, a righteous man, confronted with a moral dilemma – a fiancée with child. An angel of the Lord appears to help with his decision. So, did he get a

clear and easy answer from the angel? Hardly! Nothing is clear-cut for this poor man. On and on it goes in the hard choices poor Joseph must make.

Of course, what happened to the father, happened to the son. Jesus faced many a dilemma. Epiphanies are not always eureka moments, light bulbs going on inside the head, or easy “Ah ha’s” dispensed as if by magic.

But these hard choices do us great favour, if we are prepared to look under the cover, as it were.

The teachings of Jesus as Matthew depicts, unfold in one of two ways.

1] Setting forth as sheer spiritual fact what is counter to all conventional wisdom. For example, (“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”), or

2] Pointing out how impossible it is to draw neat distinctions, and make clear choices, by means of seemingly obvious guidelines (for instance, wheat and tares allowed to grow together.)

Even at the gospel’s end, at the resurrection; there are some who doubted. And in the great commission, no distinction is made between believers and doubters in sending forth.

What is Matthew trying to tell us today?

One of the answers is that discernment comes to us by the grace of God.

The other one goes like this: not only is the kingdom of heaven like such a windfall: it is also the pearl of great price – the culmination of a systematic search over an extended period by a seasoned expert.

Perhaps the problem with our understanding of the star is that we have been conditioned, through cards and carols to expect a once-for-all burst of light; when what the star actually gives the Magi is, at best, an occasional fleeting sense of orientation to help them get their bearings as they wander.

Even those seemingly instantaneous experiences we call epiphanies are usually, though not always, a coming into focus of a realisation that has been a long time coming. Maybe

an experience of Epiphany is given as a point that is memorable, a mark point if you like, whose function is to serve our memory with courage and hope as we move forward.

The Magi, after having left their gifts, received a warning word. Rather than returning to Herod, “they departed into their own country by another way.” No one knows what sort of journey the return trip was.

I wonder how they navigated their way back with no star to guide them. No sat nav in those days!

You know, sometimes our journey of faith is easy, our route quick and simple – like that of the shepherds.

At other times, it’s a long trek, a winding road, beset with all sorts of setbacks, problems and frustrations.

But if we keep our eyes on the signs that God gives us, and not allow ourselves to be diverted by other voices, other invitations, we will discover the source of all life and truth.

We need to be open to what God is saying, what he is showing us and be sensitive to his leading. It might be a long hard slog at times. I’m sure it was for the wise men but they “kept on keeping on” until they made it.

Their journey is perhaps a bit like ours. Sometimes we see, sometimes we don’t, but we keep travelling on.

We are at the start of a New Year and we are all on a spiritual journey. Sometimes we will know the way forward, other times it may not be so clear, but we keep travelling on as God’s people here in this parish.

As we travel through life, as we come here today, we may have very fixed ideas about God, about life, about ourselves. But how wise are we? Are we open to new revelations, new ideas? Unless we are, we will never discover the gifts God has in store for us, never have that personal encounter with the living God, never experience that overwhelming joy of discovery, never feel that welling up of thanksgiving within us.

So, will we be any the wiser for this morning? Will our lives be any different? Will we be prepared to look, to listen, to travel in faith, as the wise men did?

A new year – who knows what it holds? But reach for the stars,(Per Ardua ad Astra) journey in faith, hope, and excitement; and discover for yourself the joy of salvation, revealed in Jesus Christ.

Offer to him all you have and are, in joyful, loving and obedient service, until your life ends and your journey on earth is over. Let us travel well, travel in faith, travel on, travel together, and may the God of peace fill us with all joy and hope in believing, every step of the way.

Amen