

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 3 January 2016 – Epiphany Year C

However familiar it may be, the Christmas story still surprises. This year, many sermons and services focussed on the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt to escape persecution. Then, Mary, Joseph and the child begin their life together as refugees, travelling south and west into Egypt; now, refugees pour into Europe from war-torn lands in Africa and the Middle East. Herod's slaughter of the innocents – the act of a politician who will stop at nothing to preserve his power – is being re-enacted on the shores of the Mediterranean and as bombs fall from the skies and mothers still weep for their murdered children. Here, the images on our side panels have been unfolding the theme of displacement, to remind us that there is another, harder side to the story than shepherds and angelic voices: one of a forced journey to a strange land with no assurance of safety or welcome, one in which there is no room found and no mercy shown.

If that has, rightly, formed part of our reflection this Christmas, today we turn to that other journey in the narrative. It's just as familiar – journey of the wise men, magi or astrologers, students of the skies, who follow a bright star from east to west to find a promised king. But it too springs a few surprises. Because they are men of power and influence, once they finally reach Jerusalem they naturally go to the top for information, to the court of Herod, since they don't know where the child is to be born. Herod doesn't either; but his clergy know their Scriptures and tell him. Perhaps it was naïve of them not to realise that if you ask one king of the Jews about where another king of the Jews has been born he is likely to be concerned. Perhaps they only become suspicious after Herod asks them to return when they have found this other king, so that he too may pay him homage, which is why their dreams warn them to return home another way. Yet their presence in the story is troubling, for without them Herod would have known nothing of a potential threat to his throne and would never have ordered the massacre of young children in and around Bethlehem. That's life for you – or rather, that's the Bible, where apparently simple stories are anything but, once you read them attentively. The astrologers' quest reaches its goal but in place of the expected signs of royalty they find a poor family and a baby lodged in a stable;

while their enquiry sets in train a series of events which bring horror in their wake.

If you look carefully at the second chapter of St Matthew's Gospel you may notice something unusual about its structure. It's a story in five movements, each of which is presented as the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy: the virgin who conceives a son, from Isaiah; the place of his birth, from Micah; the flight into Egypt from Hosea, the massacre of the Innocents from Jeremiah; and the place to which they return, from the unlikely source of the book of Judges. Five short narratives, each one followed by the comment that 'this was to fulfil what was written'. What is Matthew up to? If, as many scholars say, his audience was primarily a Jewish one, then he is clearly anxious to show how the Hebrew Scriptures witness to the coming of the Messiah whom he proclaims; and he needs to do this, because in almost every way Jesus of Nazareth is not what people expected when they longed for a deliverer. They imagined crowns and thrones and armies; not a manger or a Cross. The wise men must have been just as puzzled. So it's hardly surprising, then, that T.S. Eliot has them wonder when they return home whether they had witnessed a birth or a death, and why they no longer feel at ease in the old, familiar places. They know their journey has changed them, but they can't put their finger on how.

Dig a little deeper, and the story yields more fruit. The prophecies tell of a birth which defies biological norms because the one who is born will defy so many of the conventions of his time and religion. They speak of Bethlehem, the city of David, as the place from which a ruler will come; but this is a ruler who will shepherd his people, care for them, minister to their needs, not lord it over them, let alone rob and defraud them. They tell of a flight to Egypt, back to the very place where the children of Israel had been enslaved and from which they had escaped, in that most dramatic of journeys. Matthew takes Hosea's 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' as the sign that in this child that ancient exodus will be repeated and fulfilled, as he leads people out of all that stifles and imprisons them and into a freedom they had never known before. There will be innocents who suffer as the story unfolds: there always are, when powerful individuals put their own interests first. Even though this child will grow into adulthood and Herod is long gone, he too will meet a cruel death at the hands of the Roman governor Pilate and at the instigation of his own religious leaders, who see

his popularity with ordinary people as a threat. He must be sacrificed to preserve the status quo. The final prophecy, concerning Nazareth, is the hardest to interpret, as the prophecy in Judges appears to refer not to a place but to a religious calling. The most famous Nazarene in Scripture was Samson. Nazarenes made a solemn vow to live an ascetic life under God, and Samson, unlike this child, did not always live up to that. That's one possible sense. Another is that Matthew may be playing on the Hebrew word *netser*, a branch, which occurs in one of Isaiah's Messianic prophecies, the one about the branch or shoot which will come out of the stem of Jesse. These five prophecies attached to each moment in the story of Christ's birth hint at the story which will unfold through the rest of the Gospel, of one who interprets religion by love, instead of using religion to say what can and cannot be; and who must and will pay the price for breaking the rules of the game.

What about the star? Many of us are awed by the vastness of the night sky on a clear winter's night away from the glare of light pollution. Some of you will have watched *The Sky at Night* special on Wednesday, which was devoted to what astronomical phenomenon the star of Bethlehem may have represented. The presenters concluded that the most likely candidates were a comet or a nova (less dramatic than a supernova). It was a good programme, which took Matthew's account seriously and examined the historical records of comets and planetary conjunctions in the skies between 7 and 5 BC (Herod the Great died in 4BC, so Jesus must have been born before then). It hadn't occurred to me, for example, that the star seems to appear twice to the magi – as they set out for Jerusalem, and again on the way to Bethlehem. Fascinating though it was, I don't think Matthew was as interested in the star as a phenomenon as he was in what it meant for these travellers. Matthew never tells us that they were kings or that there were three of them: all that is the stuff of later legendary elaboration, as, too, their names. Who, then, were they, and why did they undertake a long journey west which was bound to be hazardous? The consensus is that they were astrologers, the scientists and philosophers of their day, who studied the heavens for an understanding of the world. The unexpected appearance of a new star in the otherwise predictable night sky would indicate to them that an important event was about to take place. We may not think much of their scientific knowledge in

comparison with ours, but they shared one important quality with modern researchers: they were curious, and wanted to investigate a phenomenon they didn't understand. To do so, they knew that sitting at home wondering about it would never get them anywhere: they must make the effort to find out for themselves, to follow the star and see where it led them. The star is not the goal of their searching; it is their inspiration and guide.

I like the fact that the star turned them into people on the move, as they sought this royal child. In his sermon on their journey, which inspired Eliot's famous poem, the seventeenth-century preacher Lancelot Andrewes makes much of the hardships of the journey: 'through deserts, all the way waste and desolate; a cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey; the ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, the very dead of winter'. It is, of course, much easier to sit at home, lamenting the state of the world. We've been disappointed so often in leaders who make great promises and who prove to be just as fallible as their predecessors. We become cynical, and that breeds a kind of passivity. Parents blame computer games, but the same was said about television when I was growing up. What can we do about anything? Let someone else sort it out. We want to be entertained, informed, presented with the evidence on a plate, say 'how interesting', and then move on to the next thing.. We don't much want to get up and start looking. What are we looking for? Where would we start? What stars will light up the night sky for us and lead us to that better and kinder world we dream of but scarcely dare believe can ever be?

Well, in a way, these mysterious sages from the east give us the answer, as does the child whom they sought. Look, and you will find. The converse is true, too: don't bother to look, and you'll never even know there is anything to be found. But what you will find is not what you expect. It isn't cast-iron proof; it isn't a magic wand which you can wave to wish away all the ills of the world. It is the beginning of a story we shall follow closely over the next four months, as the baby grows to manhood, is put to death and rises from the place of destruction. But above all it is an invitation to a journey. The late Christopher Hitchens wrote that he was not a believer because he objected to love's being compulsory. I wish he could have understood that

it isn't. Compulsory love is a duty grudgingly done. Divine love is an invitation to be transformed and to join the dance of creation, away from broken dreams and fading treasures, into the kingdom of the Christ Child. In his long poem *For The Time Being*, written in the middle of the Second World War, W.H. Auden has each of the wise men explain why he is following the star: 'to discover how to be truthful now', 'how to be living now', 'how to be loving now'; then, together, 'to discover how to be human now'. That's where the star points in our own time; that's what churches are for: our eyes on the star and our feet firmly on the ground. You must be prepared for discomfort and surprise on this journey, but it is worth, infinitely worth, the searching and the following.