

Epiphany – 2018

Santa, as always was good to me! I received the boxed set of 'Yes Minister' and 'Yes Prime Minister!' Wonderful comedy, insightful, clever and satirical. In one of the early episodes a visiting African leader wants aid for his country but it is all tied up with British industry and, of course, a soon to be held by-election! We live in a transactional world, it is all about economic growth supply and demand etc. But most of us don't want to live in an economy we want to live in community. And thereby lies something of the basis of Christian faith it is *not* transactional! Clearly we need a new vision in our world.

Every year I wonder about these Wise Men; who were they? Were they ambassadors from a foreign power come to ingratiate themselves with what they thought was a new regime? Were the gifts merely baubles to tempt this new regime to do trade deals, form military alliances and the like? What must they have thought when they realised that this is no ordinary ruler? He was not to be found at the royal court in Jerusalem, Herod does not know him or his whereabouts and after finding the child they are mysteriously told to leave quietly - return home on the back roads? What must they have said to the potentate who perhaps sent them on this mission? Did he or she (The Queen of Sheba) want the gifts back, there was nothing to show for them, no economic or defence treaties signed, trade deals done. Did their journey change them into visionaries, opening their eyes to new possibilities? Their quest to discover 'who is this King' is the theme of the gospels, it becomes our quest and the gospels our road map for the journey. The gospels in fact are our star if we really see and we are often surprised where that star rests. Because when it does we are never left unchanged by what we find.

We've seen the usual litany of war, terrorism and the like this year, the procession of megalomaniacs Mugabe, Putin, Kim, Duterte etc. We might want to either retreat into the past, but we can't, we might feel ourselves descending into gloom and doom but we mustn't; we are called to completely the opposite. Just as the same issues seem to constantly beset us, it should serve as a reminder of the unchanging, timeless truth of our faith in God revealed in Jesus, it should serve to keep us focussed, striving for that truth. St Paul writing to his beloved Philippians wanted to encourage them in their journey of faith, speaking of the resurrection to which he aspires he writes: I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

Paul could be writing to us. We have come so far on this journey, let us not be distracted by what occurred last year but keep persevering, straining forward, holding fast to that gift of faith that we share and celebrate, and prayerfully

and worshipfully ponder. We must continue to continue to follow this star. The beginning of this New Year reminds us of the passage of time and this journey, this pilgrimage that we are all on together in different places on the journey as Paul reminds us, but all in our way open to God's revelation and the surprises it brings.

What of this revelation? Who is this child? Do the Magi find their question answered? Has their quest been an unqualified success? As ambassadors probably not... but as visionaries. But every year when I ponder this feast I read 'The Journey of the Magi' by T.S. Eliot and it helps. It opens:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,*

I didn't realise it until this year but these are words spoken in a sermon by Lancelot Andrewes the 17th Century Bishop of Winchester. In another part of the sermon he chides his congregation:

And we, what should we have done? Sure these men of the East will rise in judgment against the men of the West, that is with us, and their faith against ours in this point. With them it was 'we saw and we came'; with us it would have been we'll come later at most. Our fashion is to see and see again before we stir a foot, especially if it be to the worship of Christ. Come such a journey at such a time? No; but fairly have put it off to the spring of the year, till the days longer, and the ways fairer, and the weather warmer, till better travelling to Christ. Our Epiphany would sure have fallen in Easter week at the soonest.

We'll follow when we know more, when the weather's better, when I'm not so busy, when I can afford it! That's us to a tee isn't it? That's our modern world. We are too busy! What of The magi? 'We saw and we came!' We don't know what they learnt, what they thought about their journey and what they thought about Christ child but we do know that it wasn't what they expected and they returned *another* way, with another vision. Where they ever the same again after that star had stopped? How were they changed by this experience? Eliot ends the 'The Journey of the Magi:'

This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

If we can do anything for our lives of faith in this New Year it is to be less busy, watch where this star of gospel faith is leading us, be open to it, when it pauses allow our faith to change us; to see things differently, metaphorically travel another road, not to be completely at ease but to see a new vision. Let's not be distracted by 2017, our pilgrimage continues, let us 'bend our joyful footsteps.' Amen, and a happy New Year.