

Epiphany – 2017

Every year we look back and say the same sort of things ‘what a year it’s been’ we rehearse the great events, those who have died, and those who have made the news. And we look back and we celebrate and then perhaps we commit ourselves to some resolutions and we push on. One commentator this week opened an article saying ‘when it comes to tumultuous years, 2016 certainly stands out!’ I think she is right and on this occasion we are justified in looking back over the past year and engaging in some serious reflection.

Whatever your political allegiances and whatever you think of the result, I doubt that many of you found the American presidential election campaign edifying in anyway. At best it was embarrassing and worst it was wicked. Whilst we haven’t quite plumbed those depths our General Election was hardly something which demonstrated our democratic processes at their best. We all know that many of our elected representatives are fine people, with great visions and hopes and dreams for this nation, but the all-pervasive cult of celebrity, the demands of a media hungry electorate, and the endless polls seems ever present to stymie good policy making and to give rise to cheap populism. This in turn creates a cynicism about our leaders and representatives, these are people we need to be able to trust.

The Psalmist knew all about this. ‘Put not your trust in princes’ we sing in psalm 146 and yet we do, don’t we? The modern translations put it ‘don’t put your confidence in powerful people’ but we do don’t we? The people of Israel had seen many Kings come and go, in the first book of Kings we read about Ahaziah: He did evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of his father and in the way of this mother and in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. There really is nothing new under the sun.

What of these kings that we celebrate today! I am confused about these kings, these wise men, these Magoi, Magi. They have found their way into our consciousness, our imagination as rather jolly figures riding their camels across the desert in search of the Christ child, finely robed with royal crowns bearing these wonderful and costly gifts. They have by tradition been given names, Kasper, Melchior and Balthasar, they even have resting place in Cologne Cathedral. In the rectory we even have a humble towel in their honour. It shows a young woman looking wistfully from her window at three exotically dressed men bearing presents; and the text? ‘Cecily would have been quite satisfied with one moderately intelligent man bearing Pinot Noir.’ Bill Leak the cartoonist features these exotic men looking at a computer and wondering they didn’t wait for the sales before they bought their gifts. Few NT characters seem to have so much legend and mythology surrounding them, but what does the scriptural witness say about these individuals, who were they?

Matthew’s gospel describes them as Magi a title from which we get the words magic and magicians. For us today magicians are clever performers, illusionists and sometimes comedians, a la Tommy Cooper! But for the people of New Testament time they were seers, soothsayers, shamans and they were clearly ubiquitous. Jesus clearly wanted to

distance himself from these folk. In Mark's gospel he is insistent that those whom he healed or touched in some way did *not* speak of their encounter, he knew how he would be viewed and that he would be misunderstood, thought of as yet another travelling healer and preacher

In the Book of Acts, Paul and the other apostles come across these magicians in a couple of encounters, Simon the Magus and Elymas the magician are sent packing in no uncertain terms. The word used again is Magi or derivatives of it. So what of these travellers from the east how should we approach them?

Quite clearly they were clever individuals, they had the ability to navigate and to look to the heavens for celestial bodies. The best of them would have been engaged in the court of the local ruler to give sage advice based on astrology and other superstitious practices. Our Magi were maybe sent by a local potentate to see who this new ruler was, it was perhaps a diplomatic mission, certainly the gifts they carried would suggest they were wanting to impress, influence and intimidate, these were stupendously valuable items. We think of them travelling in splendid caravan but I would suggest that they either travelled with an armed escort or under the cover of darkness. The law in the Torah was explicit regarding mediums and wizards, they were not to be tolerated. They arrived in Jerusalem where, quite naturally, they expected to find this new king. As we heard in the gospel they moved on to Bethlehem with their gifts and a request from Herod 'let me know where this king is to be found.'

The gifts of course take on a whole new meaning when offered to Jesus. He is a ruler like no other, his Kingship is revealed by the gift of Gold. But offered to Jesus it causes us to consider very carefully the nature of power and authority and its use for human good. The Frankincense denotes Jesus as the Priest the one who will offer the ultimate sacrifice and which speaks of the nature of the God we worship and the Myrrh is a symbol of Christ as the prophet, the one whose death speaks of the ultimate judgement on the world but whose resurrection speaks of the hope that it brings. Jesus is prophet, priest and king, he is like no other king, leader, president or prime minister. He is the one in whom we can place our trust, but can we? This is perhaps the challenge presented to us as we enter this New Year. Amidst our anxiety and concerns about those with great responsibility and authority are we, like the Magi, prepared to journey, to search for ultimate truth which transcends earthly power and to trust in it, to have Paul's boldness and confidence? What's holding us back?

Those gifts given, offered by us like the Magi could well represent something more: the gold, our willingness not to allow our prosperity to govern our thinking, to cloud our judgement. The Frankincense those things, those idols that we worship and the Myrrh the fear of mortality that haunts us. Because I have a hunch that behind our anxieties about politics lurk these issues, issues that will prevent us from searching for what really matters, perhaps they need to be reflected upon as we move in this New Year. I pray that it will be a year filled with joy, contentment, enchantment and spiritual growth.

A happy new year to you all! Amen.