

SERMON FOR THE EPIPHANY at 8am | 07.01.18

Creator of the Heavens, who led the Magi by a star to worship the Christ-child: guide and sustain us, that we too may find our journey's end in Jesus Christ our Lord. (Collect for the Feast of the Epiphany)

In the simple words of today's Collect a whole mass of ideas are given to us. We might not spend much time looking at the night skies hereabouts in London given all the light pollution but all the fireworks at New Year around the London Eye did remind us to look up and to marvel at what is above our heads. There is still something extraordinary about stars. They are never still.

That they should move three kings or astrologers or philosophers 'from the east' to one small room in Bethlehem can be interpreted in any number of ways but the theme of journey and journeying in the pursuit of something profound and life-changing is an experience that we all have in one form or another. Leaving behind the familiar – both people and places – moving on, taking the risk in the hope of something new and possibly better is our common story, the story of being human.

The poetry in this short passage from Isaiah captures this moment of decision: *Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.* All our journeys are part of tidal wave of activity as each one of us searches for the right place in which to flourish and to put down new roots.

And then: *they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.* For in each of our journeys we take with us our own personal 'baggage allowance', the experiences and skills we have acquired in the past, things we hope will equip us for whatever the future holds.

So what is our gold? Is it just money, more or less according to how lucky or clever we have been? Maybe. But wealth for its own sake is rarely attractive and doesn't make us friends on its own.

So perhaps our gold is best described as the qualities that we carry with us – our creativity and integrity, our willingness to work hard. But in this Epiphany story the gold was carried by one of the Magi not as a form of personal treasure but as a gift: he was preparing to take what was his – and to give it away.

How often in our journeys we have been in that situation, knowing that to achieve what was right we have had to give up what we had in our pockets, our time and/or our money, and have literally given it away? And it has not been easy.

And frankincense? Not to everyone's taste the perfumed smoke that we use in Christian liturgy but the symbolism is inescapable: at every point in our journey we express our feelings – the joys, the tiredness, our reflections on the new experiences both good and bad. We can't help it: we can't keep these things to ourselves. Yet because we are Christians we know these thoughts, muddled and incomplete as they may be, rise to a destination of their own. We are not travelling by ourselves but are accompanied, always and everywhere, by our Heavenly Father who hears every gasp of delight and every groan of despair. The image of smoke rising is a reminder that we are in deep conversation with the God who made us – not in formal prayers so much as by the constant, regular action of our breathing – drawing in the oxygen of our living God and sharing our hopes and dreams with him in return.

And the significance of myrrh, the oil of anointing the body of those of who have died? In TS Eliot's famous poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, one of the three asks exactly what his journey had been for? *There was birth certainly: yet I had seen birth and death and thought that they were different. This birth was hard and bitter for us, like death – our death. And so we returned to our places, these Kingdoms, no longer at ease here in the old dispensation...*

The word Epiphany means revelation. The journey of life which each of us undertakes with our gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh is, ultimately, the search for the Christ-child; we know that only in searching for him can we become the fully rounded and fulfilled people that God intends us to be.

But we cannot be surprised if he takes us on a journey into some pretty deep, difficult and 'uneasy' places. All we know is that he is always there, inviting us to leave behind the old dispensation in exchange for this epiphany: giving away may seem like death but is always the surer way of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. Like the Magi we shall be changed. But let Isaiah have the last word: *lift up your eyes and look around you: they will all gather together, your sons and your daughters from far away. And your heart shall thrill and rejoice because of the abundance that shall be brought to you...*