

## **SERMON FOR FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY | 05.01.2020**

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 1-12; St Matthew 2: 1-12

Thinking today about the dreadful consequences that befell the children around Bethlehem after King Herod was ignored by the three astrologers who turned up unannounced on his doorstep, I have spent a while looking back over all the chance meetings that I have had, that have made such a difference to my life.

In fact I would say that most of the really important events have been marked by meetings with individuals – people who have gone out of their way to help – rather than by groups: the little old lady neighbour who kept an eye on me when I was ‘home alone’ as a very young child, a Vicar who put up with my odd adolescent questions, a Jewish lady who encouraged my early attempts to be musical, people who gave me the chance to travel abroad. The list is huge.

Life is so often about risk-taking; about being vulnerable and allowing events to take their course, learning not to take rejections too personally nor to cut ourselves off from the world by only spending time with those who make us feel good.

The issue is what we do with those chance encounters.

Part of this reflection has been the result of having received far fewer Christmas cards in 2019 than in previous years. Of course the cost of cards and postage has gone up hugely and the option of sending an electronic greeting or of giving money to charity in lieu is not for everyone. I think too that the effort of sending cards and messages has never really caught on in my children’s generation: it is a load of effort and often seems a bit tokenistic.

There is too, the challenge of when a friendship naturally ends. Is it when one hasn’t seen or at least talked to someone for a year or two - or even a decade or two? In mobile societies like ours isn’t it the case that we pick up friends and acquaintances quite quickly and easily – but are just as likely to lose touch with them after the initial reason for meeting has passed? Why hang on to people when our lives have moved on?

**But it is into that rather utilitarian frame of mind that the Three Kings/Magi/astrologers – call them what you will- come into view. Highly regarded in their own communities these three would have been watching the stars for years – and would have been pretty skilled at seeing the changes in the constellations above their heads. And on just that evidence they find themselves compelled to pack up their jobs at home and to travel – literally - to see what was happening in a far away place. What drove them was a belief that there was a person out there whom they had to meet.**

**It is this openness to the difference this meeting would mean that got them onto their camels and away from all that was familiar at home. The more we think about it the more extraordinary it seems: we might sing about ‘following a star’ (following a dream or an ambition is another way of describing it) but a successful outcome on this particular quest must have seemed pretty unlikely, even to them.**

**But it is that trust that there was a purpose to all of this uncertainty, that we are celebrating today; here at Epiphany we slow down and ask the question – just why would they take the plunge – with absolutely no guarantees of any sort? We marvel at their confidence that God would see them right.**

**Just as you and I can give thanks for all those people whom we have met, and all those times when we have followed a prayerful hunch and ended up in places we didn’t expect – and where we have learned new things and enjoyed new relationships.**

**I can’t commend too highly every effort to reach out to people we don’t know who need our company, our interest, our help and our prayers. It doesn’t have to be as dramatic as the journey of the Wise Men or as demanding as the sending of Christmas cards to those we have long since lost touch with.**

**But going in search of new people and new experiences may well be the way to the opening up of a completely new world to us as well as to them.**

**And the gifts that we bring – not gold, frankincense and myrrh clearly but the gifts that God has given to each of us - may be just the things which they need. Evidence of God’s ability to build bridges between people who have and people who have not, is far too huge for me to describe here.**

**Justin Welby has used the term ‘reconnecting’ to make this same point: *Let’s resolve, he says, to reach out to one person we don’t know or from whom we have drifted apart. Choose one person. Pick up the phone. Send them a text. Meet for a cup of tea...***

**We can’t know what will come out of it and sometimes it won’t be anything much. But like the wise men, we trust that God can make something of our willingness to go out of our comfort zone and to share the gifts at our disposal with those who would otherwise go without.**

**And at the same time, we might just give thanks for the people who have reached out to us in the past – and reassured us that God has not forgotten us.**