

**Sermon preached by the Rt Rev'd Tim Stevens  
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
The Festival of The Epiphany of Our Lord  
Sunday 7 January 2018**

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*"When they saw that the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy"*  
(Matt 2: 10)

The Wise Men were particularly intriguing to a three year old on Christmas Eve.

They hadn't yet arrived at the stable of course, so after we had all sung "Away in a Manger", holding our candles very carefully here in front of the crib, our little granddaughter Grace went looking for them.

Eventually she found them, at the far eastern end of the Cathedral, resting their camels just next to the High Altar.

For a three year old, this was the obvious cue for a deluge of questions – Who were they? Where had they come from? Why were they following the Star?

Unfortunately St Mathew doesn't give us all the answers. The Wise Men are essentially as mysterious for us at this Feast of the Epiphany as they were for Grace two weeks ago.

"From the East" leaves unanswered all kinds of puzzles about their origin – almost certainly they were bringing gifts from what we now know as a region torn apart by war, terrorism and religious conflict. They could not have been Muslims then of course but their lands were where the birth of Islam occurred 5 centuries later.

So their presence in the stable is a reminder of the essential strangeness of what we think of as a familiar story.

Picture yourself in the stable: this is not an English, Anglican scene – it's not even Christian. A Jewish family away from home, surrounded by animals and peasant shepherds are joined by wandering sages from an alien world and an alien faith. That's how Epiphany- the showing forth of God's presence in the world, the intersection of time with eternity- happens.

That's how it happens in our day too. God is revealing Himself in unfamiliar places to some very unfamiliar people.

Look to the devastated city of Mosul in war torn Iraq, liberated from Isis this November, where a group of young Muslim volunteers got together to help local Christians rebuild the ancient monastery of Mar Georges. They did so to remind their Christian brothers and sisters that "Mosul is yours as much as it's ours".

Look to the cathedral in that same troubled city where Christians and Muslims attended the midnight mass together this year in a display of profound human solidarity and relief after the appalling terror of the Isis occupation.

Or look more closely to home where only four weeks ago the relatives of the Grenfell Tower victims, mostly Muslim, gathered in St Paul's Cathedral to share their grief and trauma and tears in a place of Christian worship. To see the expressions on their faces as a banner was borne in procession by a priest and an imam was to realise that God's Epiphany touches and moves people in the very depths of their souls unconstrained by doctrines or creeds.

I was reminded of that here at the end of the midnight eucharist when my Iphone buzzed and a message of Christmas greeting popped into my in box from a Muslim friend and colleague from my Leicester days. He recognised that for Christians that midnight moment is a particular touching place of time with eternity.

At this Epiphany season we are celebrating the truth that God makes himself known to those who may be very strange to us and who see the world very differently from us. After all Jesus taught us to see the image of God in the least of our brothers and sisters – those on benefits, the homeless, especially the so-called nobodies who cannot or will not play our game of success. Indeed he went further and insisted that we have to recognise the divine image even in our enemies.

It was Ghandi who reminded us of this when he said: "If you don't find God in the very next person you meet it is a waste of time looking for him further."

What the poets and the prophets and the scientists make clear to us is that all of creation has the potential to reveal God to us.

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that ours is a world: "charged with the grandeur of God, It will flame out like shining from shook foil." The prophet Isaiah says: "the whole earth is full of his glory". William Blake spoke of the need to "See a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower."

So think of the great discoveries of scientific history – Isaac Newton's explanation of gravity or Darwin's of evolution or Einstein theory of relativity – these also are epiphanies, a showing forth of something new about the nature of God's creation. To believe in a sacramental world is to believe that God's spirit speaks through matter, that God penetrates His creation and may be found within it.

These revelations can't, of course, be confined just to us Anglicans, doing our familiar thing in a familiar cathedral.

One of the most famous attempts to convey something of this truth was made by T S Elliott when he wrote his poem "The Journey of the Magi." The poem recounts the story of the Wise Men's long and arduous journey in winter to find

the place of the divine birth. Their discovery is unsettling for them, nothing is going to be quite the same again. The old familiar routines no longer open up their hearts and minds to see God in their midst. Now they have to be open to something new. The poem ends:

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.”

The journey of the Magi seemed enchanting but mysterious to a three year old on Christmas Eve. We need to be open to her questions, ready to explore the mystery afresh at the start of this New Year. How do we begin our journey with them to the place of revelation, the touching place of heaven and earth? How shall we use the months ahead to practise becoming ever more alert to God's image revealing itself to us in every moment of every day?

The answer lies here at the altar where the ordinary food of everyday is offered, taken and blessed and becomes the means by which the Christlike God becomes present to us in the form of bread and wine. This is the point of the eucharist, that the God revealed in Christ, sought after by the Magi, foretold by the prophets, is to be met here and now: here and indeed everywhere.

As the bread of the eucharist is placed in our hands, we may recall the words of St Augustine: “ You are the body of Christ: that is to say, in you and through you the work of the Incarnation must go forward. You are meant to incarnate in your lives the theme of your adoration-you are to be taken, consecrated, broken and distributed, that you may be the means of grace and vehicles of the Eternal Charity.”

Here at this altar, at this moment, by God's grace, we are the vehicles of God's image in the world. Here at this altar we too are at the place where the star stops and perhaps, if we trust this truth, we too with the Wise Men may be overwhelmed with joy.

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