

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Epiphany 2015

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People's fascination down the ages has added new dimensions to the story of the wise men visiting Jesus and the holy family, so that an unspecified number of wise men has become three kings, and the gifts they brought have been given defined meanings. Putting aside the additions to the Matthean narrative that we have created, it remains a story that compels us to draw deeper into a sense of mystery, and in the Church it leads us into a season of Epiphany when the wondrous tales of Christ's revealing to the world are celebrated: his baptism by John in the Jordan, and the first miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. The theme of God's revelation beyond His people Israel to the whole world.

The journey of the Magi, symbolizes the faith journey of men and women down the ages. The doubts, the fears, the decision to give up and turn back for home, but still something nagging in the back of one's head, says 'stay with it, keep on traveling'. The wise men is a metaphor for our own spiritual life and journey of faith. Firstly, we follow our star; secondly, we must be prepared for surprises as we journey in faith; and finally we must be willing to be changed. Epiphany is a feast which celebrates the manifestation of God to humanity in the person of Jesus. Yet, an epiphany is also an intuitive perception or insight. This describes the experience of the wise men who were willing to leave safety and familiarity, to risk a difficult and costly journey to follow their star. They were willing to follow their intuition which led them on their own particular journey to meet with Jesus, the vulnerable child who was king. Have you ever acted on that impulse that is counter-intuitive to others, where others thought your decision was quite mad, but you knew it was right?

Five years ago, four months after my father died suddenly of pancreatic cancer, my younger brother also died, leaving four children. Devastated with grief, I decided to take six months out of ministry, and left my post as Canon Residentiary of Sheffield Cathedral, where I had served for eight years. I had no other job to go to and nowhere to live. Yet, I knew it was right for me to rest a while and watch over myself in order to for healing to begin through

grief. I had the power to make such a decision, but everyone around me thought I was mad. It was counter-cultural and many saw this as high risk. Yet, it turned out to be the right decision.

So, a wise and Christian journey is always of faith, whatever star we follow. What prompted the wise men to go on an uncertain and perilous journey: 'where was he who had been born king of the Jews?' God's journeys always involves faith. People of faith have been willing to respond to the challenges of the unknown in search for God. Faith does not mean certainty. It means having the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, but rather having the courage to ask the questions, to go on the journey and to follow a star – to respond to intuition, that inner sense of calling by God that many searching a vocation to ordination often articulate. It is risky faith in action.

The word intuition is derived from a Latin word (*intueri*) meaning 'to see within.' 'It is with the heart that one sees rightly. So, how have we followed our 'star'? Well it will lead us into surprising places and force us to confront some difficult and disturbing issues, like racism, asylum seekers, sex trafficking, assisted dying, exploitation of the poor, and many other challenging and disturbing issues for the Church and our faith to speak into the public arena. As the wise men discovered in their dealings with Herod, following a star can become political. Charles Peguy, the French poet and philosopher said that everything that matters begins in mysticism but ends in politics. The star leads us to surprising places.

We can often look in the wrong places to find God. The wise men knew that Herod's palace was not the birth place of the one they sought. They didn't go to the Jewish Temple to find God's presence. They went to an unexpected place, where love was wrapped in a manger. There are no limits placed on where the divine and human Christ can be found. And, when we discover Jesus as the shepherds and wise men did, we should be willing to be surprised. Epiphany is a feast which challenges our assumptions. The readings for Epiphany Sunday speak of the irresistible pull felt by the wise men who sensed God's revelation, took risks, saw within themselves that following their star would lead them to Christ.

The wise men also discovered that for their journey back they had to go home by another way: 'Then being warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.' That is the trouble with God, he will not leave us as we came but sends us stripped of your presumptions, making for home by another way, and we find our lives changed by the inner voice we follow that leads us to Jesus in a manger where we offer our particular gifts.

In the *Journey of the Magi* by T. S. Elliot he wrote of the change in the wise men: 'This birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like death – our death. We returned to our palaces, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensations, with an alien people clutching their gods.' The wise-men were changed by their encounter and such changes are a sign of God's activity. If someone says to you: 'I have met with God!' Then ask them how they have changed?

The wise-men were wise because they were willing to follow their star. They were wise because they were willing to look in unexpected places where they were surprised, and they were wise because they were willing to be changed.

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