

Look for your star - keep searching

A sermon preached by Rev Charles Draper at St Peter's on Epiphany Sunday, 7 January 2018
Refs: Isaiah 60. 1-6; Ephesians 3. 1-12; Matthew 2. 1-12

I love the way the twelve days of Christmas, ending with Epiphany, stretch across into the New Year – so that Christmas is not just a beautiful way to end the old year, but with the twelve days of Christmas and Epiphany, it's also a wonderful way to start a new year.

The Epiphany story is irresistible. These strange mysterious figures from far away who we imagine with camels and flowing colourful robes, bringing those exotic gifts and a strange story of following a star. It's all rather mysterious and exciting and hugely significant. This is the first real sign that this child born in Bethlehem has come, not only for his own people of Israel, but for the whole world, all nations, peoples and cultures.

There's so much to say about this story but there are three things I want to draw out: its significance for the world; its significance for us as a local church here in Wolvercote; and its significance for us as individuals.

Firstly – the world. I find it deeply poignant today that, when the story says that the wise men came from the east, it probably refers to the areas we now know as Iraq and Iran – two countries that have featured so hugely in our news for so many years, but often in ways that make us feel rather uncomfortable. Whatever our political views, we would probably all now agree rather painfully that our own involvement in this area of the world has been often misguided and at times catastrophic. The story of the wise men reminds me that this part of the world is as much part of God's purposes as any other, and that whatever mistakes we have made in the past, the attitude held by many in our country - that it's none of our business and we should wash our hands of it all and just walk away – is not particularly healthy.

I certainly don't have an answer, but I do believe that with a great deal of humility we should acknowledge that even the most intractable parts of the world are just as much part of God's purposes, and should still feature in our prayers and in our love and concern.

So the wise men from the east remind us first of all that God sent Jesus for the whole world and for every part of it. And that, of course, to go on to my second point, includes Wolvercote. Sometimes we remember the world out there miles away, but forget the world on our doorstep. Maybe for us locally, this story reminds us that Jesus came not only for us in the church, but also for the world on our doorstep. And maybe the wise men from the east for us represent those who come along at Christmas time – to Carols for Kids, or the Explorers' Christingle, or the Midnight Communion. And maybe when we read in the New Testament about the call to take the good news of Jesus out to the gentiles – the gentiles who the wise men represent - we should apply that locally to our own call to take the good news of Jesus to the many unchurched people who live on our doorstep.

One aspect of the story of the wise men illustrates this in a shocking way. We are used to the notion that the wise men followed a star. For the Jewish people, this would have been very strange and quite disturbing. The Old Testament is very clear – God's people should have nothing to do with astrology. Looking to the stars for guidance is forbidden in the Old Testament – it's completely taboo. If the Jewish people wanted to communicate with their gentile neighbours, they would use the Hebrew scriptures. But God is different. God uses a Star. Clearly God here is speaking to the wise men in a language they will understand – speaking to them in their own culture, and through their own ways of thinking.

This is a huge challenge for us today. Here at St Peter's our Team and our PCC have both agreed that our number one priority at St Peter's is to be a church for our local community. That means obviously engaging with our community, being involved in our community and loving and caring for our community. But it also means offering our community ways to come and discover the love of God and the good news of Jesus for

themselves. And that means finding ways to communicate in the language of those who don't have a church background – finding ways to communicate in our contemporary culture, in ways that people can understand. That is a huge challenge. What Star could we offer people in our community that might help those who wish to, to find their way on the journey to find Christ?

So suddenly we realise that the Epiphany story is a massive challenge to us as a church. How many wise men are there in our own community who are waiting for some Star that might help them on a journey of finding faith? This leads me to my final point – this story is good news for you and me as individuals. Because the wise men also represent you and me. Now I don't feel particularly wise – but like the wise men I am on a journey – a journey of exploration – exploring the wonderful mystery that is God, and God's loving purposes for us all. And the fact that you are here this morning tells me that you too are on this journey – that you too are seeking, like the wise men seeking for Jesus, like the wise men on a journey of exploration.

The story of God using a Star to guide the wise men on their journey tells me that God will not fail to guide us too. We are never alone on this journey. God does not leave us to stumble in the dark. If God went to the lengths of using a Star to guide the wise men, then God will go to any lengths to guide us. If God used that Star because a Star was what the wise men understood, then God will guide us in ways that we can understand. God is able to speak to us too in a language and way of thinking that we will understand.

So I would say, at the beginning of this new year, keep searching, keep exploring, as the wise men kept on their journey to find Jesus. But be very sure, if we keep searching, God will continue to guide us, and will lead us on to discover more of what the good news of Jesus really means - for us.