

Epiphany 2022

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The last time I preached here at Hailey was the third Sunday of Advent – the one with the pink candle – and, as it was the beginning of the Church’s year I suggested that we adopt this extract from Paul’s letter to the Philippians as our motto for the coming year.

Now we are at the beginning of the calendar year and I want to build on that foundation of joy, thanksgiving, and peace by considering the story of the Magi and see what we they may have to teach us for the year ahead.

I should say that a particular hobbyhorse of mine, which I have ridden here before, is that the original text of Matthew does not say anything about the gender of the Magi, who were a somewhere between scientists and experts on magic – it is only the English translations that call them men. But it has rather stuck. Our present-day equivalents are a mix of men and women, as the wise have been throughout history: Chris Whitty (the government’s chief medical adviser) and Patrick Vallance (the chief scientific adviser) but also Sarah Gilbert (the developer of the Oxford Astrazeneca vaccine) and Jennie Harries (the chief exec of the UK Health Security Agency, which ash been responsible for overseeing its rollout). I’ll leave you to decide who the equivalent of King Herod might be.

But back to the experts, and notice that I described Jennie Harries' role as overseeing. These people spend a lot of their time looking; indeed they spend more of their time looking than speaking, which is why they can often appear rather shy in front of the TV cameras. They look at print-outs of data, down microscopes, and at real-life individual patients.

And this morning I want us to consider the looking of the Magi in their time, and in their very special situation. I want us to Look and Learn about three ways of looking.

First – the Magi looked up. They wouldn't have seen the star, and they wouldn't have realised its importance if they hadn't been in the habit of surveying the heavens. Psalm 19 opens with the words 'The heavens are telling the glory of God.' – some of you may be more familiar with them in the context of Haydn's 'Creation'. The sheer wonder of God's creative power is perhaps best communicated by looking at the night sky. In Psalm 8 the psalmist reflects:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

These ancient people were not troubled by the light pollution that we have today but we too can look up and get a sense of our place in this vast universe. Some of us may find this scary, but I think it can be helpful because it puts our lives into a much bigger perspective. We now know that it takes so long for the light from distant stars to reach us that by the time we see them they are long dead. So the bigger perspective is not just about space but about time and history.

But the New Testament tells us to look up for other reasons too. The letter to the Colossians says this:

...if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above,

We look up because in Christ our dignity has been raised; we are able to grow up into the people we are called to be; because of him we can – astonishingly – look God in the face. When we lack confidence or – worse – are ashamed, we keep our heads and our eyes down, and when we do this our world contracts. But we are instructed to stand tall, stick up our chins, raise our eyes, and thus to see further.

Second – the Magi looked around. They didn't get so absorbed in the wonders of the night sky that they were unable to see what was going on in the world. Like St Ignatius of Loyola, they sought God in all things. Like good scientists they kept not only their eyes but their minds open, and when the evidence led them to an unexpected place an – obscure – occupied country and – and not its royal palace but an ordinary house and a humble family – they followed not just obediently gladly. For their vision was one of overwhelming joy.

Looking around is an important aspect of the Christian life. I once watched an episode of CBeebies with my little grandsons in which the footpups football coach – a woman called Rachel Yankey – explained the three rules of formation. I began to smile because I teach Christian formation to trainee vicars and I expected her sort of formation to be different from mine. So, I was taken aback and humbled by what she said:

Rule 1. Look around you.

Rule 2. Think how you can help the team.

Rule 3. Move to help them out.

Football and Christian spirituality weren't as different as I had thought.

We are called to look around with the eyes of Christ and also with eyes open to Christ, seeing him in unexpected places and unexpected people, and when we find him, rejoicing and – if it is required – moving to help him out.

Finally, the Magi looked in, they attended to their dreams. Looking inwards is something that we may tend to avoid as Christians; we don't want to become self-centred or self-obsessed navel-gazers. We don't want to fixate on our mental chatter – after all didn't Jesus say that we were not to worry?

But if we are to think how we can move to help out we do at least have to an accurate sense of what we can offer; furthermore there is a godly way of looking inwards, of setting aside the surface chatter of the mind and reaching into the depths of one's soul. St Augustine of Hippo once wrote:

People are moved to wonder by mountain peaks, by vast waves of the sea, by broad waterfalls on rivers, by the all-embracing extent of the ocean, by the revolutions of the stars. But in themselves they are uninterested.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made, the crown of creation, bought at a price by his Son, and we need learn to find God in ourselves, to tune into the still small voice that may speak in our quieted waking minds or the sign that may appear in our dreams, saying 'No – not that way; Follow me.'

So in the coming year let's take a leaf out of the Magi's book. Let's appreciate the big sky that we have in West Oxfordshire. Last summer Alister and I went to listen to the Hailey singers in the village burial ground; it was early evening and the sun was just setting and swallows were chasing each other across the sky. I had a deep sense of peace as I

looked up and thought, 'There is so much more.' Let's look up and forward dignified and unafraid.

Let's look for God in unexpected places, and be delighted when we find him, as Ness did when she learned so much more about the Spirit – the breath - of God as she practised yoga.

And let us look inwards, unflinching, and open to seeing ourselves as God does in Christ, as 'My beloved child with whom I am well pleased.' If we can see that then we can face anything.