

Sermon

Sunday 3 January 2021

Lesson

St Matthew 2: 1 – 12

For a brief moment, let us travel in our dreams back two thousand years across time and space to the mythical land of Shir. Lying at the extreme eastern edge of the known world, there was a community of wise men, an Order of Mystics, who studied the stars meticulously interpreting all that was written there. According to the ancient Greek Syriac Church, twelve magi, not three, journeyed through the darkness of the desert from their home in Shir to the cave of the Christ-Child in Judaea, in the small village of Bethlehem. The magi were men of wonder – astrologers, sages and kings – who prayed in silence.

In the Syriac tradition, the star of Bethlehem was Christ Himself who, having arrived in the cave ahead of the travellers, transformed Himself into a luminous infant. After they knelt reverently before the manger, the holy men rose and returned to Shir; they told their people that they too could experience the Presence of Christ, the Word and

Wisdom of God, if they receive the spiritual food which Christ offers. Whether it is three magi or twelve, the overture of Matthew's Gospel imprints upon us the importance of journey: spiritual journey and the inner quest for God.

Recently, the planets, Jupiter and Saturn, crossed paths in the night sky. The two largest planets in our solar system have not been this close for eight hundred years and it will be another four hundred years before the next conjunction. Was such a conjunction the star of Bethlehem? In the ancient world, stars and moons were living beings; their souls were believed to be divine. The appearance of a star in the night sky marking a great birth was not unusual; the star of Bethlehem may have been Christ Himself, a conjunction of planets or mythology typical of the period. Whichever it is, personal journey and spiritual pilgrimage lie at the heart of the story.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel begins provocatively in the opening story. Having journeyed through alien lands to the city of Jerusalem, the magi ask of Herod the Great, 'Where is the child who is born king

of the Jews?’ The magi presented themselves in Herod’s palace before a ruler who was known for his brutality, paranoia and petulance; he had murdered two of his own sons because he feared they were plotting against him. It was said, ‘It is better to be a pig in Herod’s household than a son!’ The scandal of Matthew’s story is that Herod the Great *was* the King of the Jews: he had been given that title decades earlier by the Roman Senate at the request of Mark Antony. St Matthew’s overture, the opening drama, tells us that the Gospel is about two kings, and their competing claims. Like the birth narratives involving Jesus, Mary and Gabriel, the story of the wise men is a polemical text: it is a clash of two kingdoms.

For me, the poetic narrative of the magi is one of journey: a journey away from the status, power, glory, egotism and seduction of this world into a life of the Spirit, of finding God, relaxing in the Eternal and cherishing the Sacred. It is also a journey of continually extending our understanding of the Divine. In 1831 in the midst of a cholera pandemic, the second one in six years in which many hundreds of thousands of people died across the world, the British

Parliament called on the King, William IV, to declare a day of 'fasting and humiliation' as an attempt to overcome the spread of the disease. On our spiritual journey, we look to the advances of science and technology for relief of disease, not a supernatural deity.

Extending our understanding of the Divine is crucially important: no system of religion can stand still.

The astronomer, Galileo, described the laws of mathematics as the language of God. He said that God had written two books: the Bible with its many meanings and nature with its fixed laws. The mathematician, Pascal, believed God to be within: in the heart, the soul, the consciousness; what is essential, what is of the essence in life, is invisible to the eye. He said, 'The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart'. For the historical giants Galileo and Pascal, these were new ways of thinking about God.

In November 1654, Pascal had an intense religious experience. As if in a dream, he gazed on the crucifixion for almost two hours. Later,

he wrote of fire, joy and peace. For Pascal, it was an epiphany, a light in his darkness, that God is hidden in the weakness of Jesus: God is present in personal crisis; not in abstract philosophy but our everyday experience: in the comfort of prayer, the solace of Scripture, the hand of friendship, and the therapy of tender silence. On our journey, in what ways do we think of God, extend our vision of God?

Christians ethics also evolve over time: the place and role of women in society and the church, so too that of children and, in more recent times, same-sex relationships. The MSP, Ruth Davidson, formerly leader of the Conservative Party in Scotland, said that:

In ten years of elected politics, I have made more mistakes than I can ever hope to remember — some through overreach, some by omission, others by nothing more than blunder. But the mistake that eats away, demanding redress, is voting against assisted dying.

Sometimes, amid complex arguments and conflicting evidence, you know — simply know in the essence of your being — that something is plain wrong. It's time to change the law.

Davidson said that it was her experience of IVF that has changed her mind. She said:

The systems and processes of egg retrieval; choosing donors through any number of characteristics from height to family medical history; embryo implant and even being able to guarantee against twins, makes a mockery of the mystique of kismet surrounding birth. And if birth can be so demystified (for the over 50,000 people who undergo IVF treatments in the UK every single year) then what rule of fate exists for death and why is there such imbalance?

In her support for assisted dying legislation for those terminally ill, she spoke of ‘a tortuous clash of head and heart, faith and intellect, [and the] right to life versus injustice of suffering’. Ethical choices are rarely clear-cut between good and evil but, more usually, between two goods. In this case, between the need to protect the vulnerable and the right to personal dignity and choice. The story of the wise men, the magi, is about journey: not merely for Christmas cards but deep spiritual searching and hard ethical choices.

Spiritual journey can be furthered by moments of simple meditation. The Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, teaches the importance of slow, gentle breathing, of finding calm in the midst of life’s current

uncertainty, chaos and stress. In silence, we are encouraged to go to the innermost self and, in the soul, say:

My deepest me is love
my deepest me is whole
my deepest me is limitless
my deepest me is infinite
my deepest me is compassion
my deepest me is sacred
my deepest me is mystery
my deepest me is forgiveness
my deepest me is beauty
my deepest me is God.

Amen.