

A Reflection from Revd Ali Massey for the Second Sunday of Christmas

Happy New Year!

After 2020 we all hope and pray that 2021 will be a much better, healthier and happier new year. Not just for us personally, but for our families, our friends, our communities and our world. I suspect that you, like I, had a very quiet New Year's Eve. Even the scaled back plans formulated at the beginning of December were cancelled. But the world still turned, the date clicked over and here we are in 2021.

This Sunday in the lectionary, is the second Sunday of Christmas. A time to celebrate the incredible gift of Godself to humanity, born as a vulnerable baby that first Christmas day. But we are also close to the season of Epiphany, when we remember the visitation of the Magi to the Christ Child. Because the feast of Epiphany is the 6th January – a Wednesday this year, it kind of gets missed – second Sunday of Christmas, this Sunday and next Sunday, spoiler alert, we leap forward in time to celebrate the baptism of Jesus. So, I thought we could spend a little time trying to hold both the revelation of the Christ Child and the visitation of the Magi together.

Our Gospel reading spelt out God's promise to all of humanity through the revelation of Godself in Christ Jesus. Through him, we all have the invitation to become children of God. To become part of a relationship with God in which we can share all the joy, comfort and belonging that God had promised to Israel through the prophets. As children of a loving Father, we all receive grace upon grace and grow into the person that God intends us to be. Godself, revealed in Jesus, came to give us life and life in all its fullness. Life where we can grow into a mature relationship with God. Life where we can use our God-given gifts to help bring about the new heaven and earth.

But unlike the turning of the year, we don't suddenly change into the person that God intends us to be. We are all on a journey, a journey that will only be complete when we see God face to face. So, what can the Magi, the wise men, the three kings tell us about our journey with God? In the traditional nativity scene, and probably on many of your Christmas cards, we see the Magi as static figures kneeling in front of the Christ Child - the culmination of their journey. The journey that began with the noticing of a star. But this wasn't just a casual glance into the night sky – it was a discovery of a new star after years of studying the stars, with an expectation that there was something to learn from them. Then, on seeing the star they were prompted to set out on the journey to know even more. They could have stayed at home and watched at a distance, but there was something about that particular star that meant that they packed up and left – not knowing the destination or how long the journey would take, they just knew this was something they had to do. I wonder, when we look at the stars, or go into the glory that is God's creation, or when we read the Bible, do we expect to be taken on a journey, an irresistible journey to discover more. To come close to God no matter where the journey takes us? No matter what the journey costs or where it might lead?

Back to the Magi, I wonder what the Magi expected of the journey ahead, as they got onto their camels and headed into the unknown? We all had a forced journey into the unknown back in March with the first lockdown. There were parts of the lockdown that were positive, the way communities came together to support each other, nature revelling in the lack of travel and pollution. But there was also a lot of pain and anxiety – the not knowing where and how it would all end.

The Magi were confident they were headed in the right direction and to the right destination. But then they took a detour – instead of keeping on following the star they went to the expected place – after all if a new king was to be born, surely it would be in a palace in the capital city. I wonder at their feelings as they slowly realised that they had just stepped into a tyrant's palace and asked

him where the new King was. As they were asked to wait for him to speak to his advisors... did they experience fear, doubt, anger, confusion?

Last year, few of us have got everything right. Churches, governments and other organisations made different decisions, according to the circumstances, and some worked out OK and some didn't. Between us, we have all experienced disappointment, doubt, fear, anger... loss. Where is God leading us? Not, I think, to the obvious place, or anywhere we expected at the beginning of last year. But beyond the walls of our homes and our churches, beyond the social circles that were our comfort zone. We are digging deep now into our reserves to go that last distance – until the time comes for the pandemic to end and for us all to be safe and back together. But I wonder if there are times when we have relied on our own strength and resources, instead of turning to God for all we need? Can we admit that we don't know best, that we sometimes also take a wrong turn. Can we take God's hand in trust and let God lead us?

When the Magi arrived, and saw that the star had stopped, they were overjoyed. They saw the Christ Child sitting with his mother, and they were moved to fall to their knees. They went to their treasures, and maybe with a little Holy Spirit prompting – they picked out the most inappropriate gifts for a small child... but yet the right gifts! Their gifts, an outward sign of their adoration with their riches, with their devotion, and with their sorrow. Gold, frankincense, myrrh.

I wonder if sometimes we get distracted in our journey. Instead of being drawn to the obvious, the city and maybe the palace, our search should be for the one who gives us life, and draws people to him. And he is often to be found in unexpected places. Amongst the poor, the lost, the stranger. In the place with no spare room. We always knew this, the Bible is clear that this is who we follow, but sometimes we do lose sight of him. So, I wonder, I wonder, where have we met Jesus on our journey? Where or in whom have we recognised him? Have we fallen to our knees, and been moved to give something of ourselves to his service? I wonder if we can be alert to where the Holy Spirit might nudge us today?

The Magi were told to take another route home. Each step we take through this pandemic feels like a new one. The possibility of having to close our churches again – having to go back to online worship, zoom meetings, rule of six, face masks and no singing at Christmas. Mingling in church frowned upon by the grumpy vicar....

When we reach the end, and there will be an end to this, will we return the way we came, placing our footsteps in whatever went before? Or will we have learned a new way of being community? Will we have discovered a new way of being church? Will we have found a new respect for God's creation and one another?

The journey has been hard, and the loss we have experienced has been great. We cannot forget and healing will take time. But I wonder how this particular journey might have changed us. In all our wanderings, Jesus remains our destination. He invites each of us to continue a journey both with, and to him. So today, will we take the hand of God and let God lead us, wherever the journey takes us.

Amen.