

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 6th January 2019 10am

Revd Val Reid

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon

Where.

The first word spoken by a human being in Matthew's gospel.

Where is the child?

So it's no wonder that the magi have become icons of seeking for meaning.

On the first Sunday of the new year, I wanted to preach about where we look for meaning in our lives.

And what we are expecting to find.

And why it's often very different.

But I find myself a bit stuck.

I'm left with questions which won't go away.

And somehow I have to reflect on those, as I walk uncertainly into 2019.

So we have these Magi.

The word is a transliteration of the Greek *magoi* – wise men, or astrologers, or magicians, or sorcerers.

No mention here of Kings (that comes from a back-reading into Isaiah 60).

Or of how many there were (there were three gifts, Matthew tells us, but we have only assumed that meant three people).

Today is the feast of the Epiphany.

It was helpfully explained by the Daily Express in Friday's newspaper:

The festive period is a time of overindulging and relaxing.

But some people find it hard to get back to reality once the dreary New Year rolls around, so many keep their Christmas tree up until January to keep the festive spirit alive.

However, keeping your decorations up too long after Christmas can spell bad luck.

Twelfth Night is a religious festival that marks the beginning of Epiphany.

In the UK, this date signals the last day of Christmas - and marks when decorations should be taken down.

For those of us looking for a little more theological accuracy than the Express, Epiphany is about revelation. Showing.

The moment when the incarnate God is revealed to people from outside.

The strangers from the East, who have followed a star.

Without really knowing what it means.

So these Magi have become great sermon topics.

They remind us of our need to keep open minds.

To listen out for the voice of God both in natural phenomena.

And in extraordinary wonders.

To be willing to move out of our comfort zones.

To keep travelling.

To be able to find God in unexpected places – stables, not palaces.

(Though the stable has been imported from Luke's story – here in Matthew it is just a house.)

But the questions I am left with are around the cost of the Magi's journey.

It's all very well to go seeking meaning.

But no choices are without consequences.

The Magi assume this king will be found in a palace.

So they head for Jerusalem to visit the only King they know.

Herod.

Herod had established himself violently as king of his own people.

He was backed by Rome.

It suited the great imperial power to have a puppet ruler.

It quite suited the priestly caste in Judea to have a king who would renovate and enlarge the temple.

It suited those with economic clout to have a king who would maintain the status quo.

And it is in the corridors of power in Jerusalem that God's values, and the values of the world of politics, clash for the first time in the gospel stories.

It is by no means the last.

Herod is frightened.

Or perhaps disturbed.

Or troubled.

This will not end well.

And, of course, it doesn't.

The Magi are warned in a dream to go home by another road.

Joseph is warned in a dream to take his family as refugees to Egypt.

But the other families in Bethlehem are not so lucky.

Herod, in his fear and disturbance and trouble has all the boys under two years old in and around Bethlehem killed.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

A voice was heard in Ramah

Wailing and loud lamentation

Rachel weeping for her children.

So actually what is the message of Epiphany?

Should the Magi have stayed at home?

Should they have shut their eyes to the disturbing, enticing star?

Should they have done a bit more research before going to the wrong place?

And what is the message for us at the start of 2019?

All those sermons about open minds, willingness to travel out of our comfort zones, looking for God in unexpected places...

What happens when there are unintended consequences?

Things go wrong.

People get hurt.

Damage is done.

Perhaps we should keep our heads down and get on with our lives unobtrusively.

But that's not the sermon I am preaching either.

That's not the God of the Hebrew Scriptures - a God who is risk-averse.

That's not the God of the incarnation, who lets go of all power and privilege and agency in order to pitch his tent alongside us.

It seems to me that whenever kingdom values and the values of this world come into conflict, there will be collateral damage.

Because people through the ages – like Herod – are frightened and disturbed and troubled when they sense a challenge to their power.

And frightened people can be cruel.

Look at the furore about refugees coming over the channel.

Or the wall along the southern border of the United States.

Or the recent Dutch intervention in the argument about who will take in the migrants rescued from the Mediterranean.

We can all behave a bit like Herod, when our security is threatened.

I don't think the message of this Epiphany story is that we should never take risks for fear of what might go wrong.

But nor is it that we should follow what we take to be the voice of God, regardless of the consequences.

Perhaps this story asks us to look into our own hearts.

Where do I find myself behaving like Herod – lashing out, behaving cruelly or selfishly, to protect what I see to be my own interests?

What would it take for me to let go of that mindset?

Where do I find myself behaving like the Magi?

Willing to move out of my comfort zone?

Willing to look for God in unexpected places?

Willing to live with the consequences of my choices and my mistakes?

Where do I find myself living in a way that echoes the movement of the incarnation?

Willing to spend time with the least powerful and the most vulnerable?

Willing to be alongside those who find themselves on the wrong side of history?

Willing to accompany those who are going through the most painful times?

Perhaps the most unexpected place where God might be revealed at the start of this New Year, is in my own life...

Amen