

NAURC Epiphany Sunday 3rd January 2021

Readings and Sermon

Readings:

Micah 5: 2-5a (New Revised Standard Version)

² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Matthew 2: 1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ '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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon:

- > What do you put at the top of your Christmas tree?
- > No, I'm not about to tell a joke I found in a cracker – it's more like an either/or question.
- > It's traditional to have either an angel or a star on the highest branch – and this year we have a star on top of ours, in fact we have quite a lot of star decorations to choose from.
- > The star is also an essential feature of all nativity scenes, as are the kings or wise men or astrologers. Some Bibles keep with the original word "magi".
- > They also adorn many a Christmas card. But the fact of the matter is that the magi arrived some while after Jesus was born – and it may be up to two years later because Herod ordered all the children of two years and under to be executed.
- > There is another hint about timing in the difference between the Luke and Matthew's accounts of the birth of Jesus – with Luke telling us he was born in a stable. By the time the Magi arrive, Matthew has them living in a house:

"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." (2: 10&11)

- > Which is why, in the church calendar, there is a pause after the celebrations of Christ -mass before we think about the visit of the magi. This also marks the beginning of the season of Epiphany where our attention is drawn to recognising the revelation of Jesus to the world.
- > I am jumping the gun a little bit, as the 'official' date of Epiphany this year is the 6th Jan – Wednesday – but I'm no good at waiting either!
- > This year I have been thinking about the star that led the magi – first of all because there is a lovely Christmas light display in Norwich city centre of some huge stars – so big you can walk through them, and yes they did make a good photo!
- > Far more importantly, was a very rare event that occurred just before Christmas this year – it was the 'great conjunction'.
- > It was Nick Phillips who alerted me to this cosmic event that happened on December 21, which saw the closest conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 397 years. From our point of view, the two giant worlds appeared only 0.1 degrees apart – well at least they would have looked that way if it hadn't been so cloudy!
- > I spotted them very close to each other on a clear night a few days before though – so I nearly saw it, and certainly won't be around to try again on the next occasion!
- > The reason I was so keen on seeing this event, is because scientists think that the conjunction of these two huge planets that merge into one extra bright light in the night sky to the naked eye, may have been the 'star' that the magi followed leading them to Jesus.
- > I find it an interesting theory, and another of those occasions when science and theology also come close to each other.
- > But it got me thinking about the significance of the star in the nativity stories.

- > Its always there – but why?
- > There had to be more to it than a glittery ornament on top of a tree or a manger scene.

- > My starting point was the appearance of the star in the first place.
- > A simplistic viewpoint would be to accept that God just got one to pop up in the correct bit of sky when it was needed – a remarkable feat of cosmic engineering I must admit – but my daft sense of humour made me think of me dangling a star decoration in the photos we did for the Christmas Day nativity story!
- > Yes, that view gives us an image of an awesome God who moves stars around at will – but I think there is a lot more to it than that.

- > It was the conjunction that got me thinking along the lines of:
If it was something like this conjunction – or maybe a slow moving comet – that caught the attention of the magi – how amazing is it that God so carefully designed the complex laws of physics that enabled such an event to occur at just the right time in just the right place – and had such an intimate knowledge that modern day science is only just beginning to grasp something of – so as to time the birth of Jesus.
- > It leaves me in awe of God who can create such things and manage them in this way. For me, just the appearance of the star gives us a glimpse of just how wonder – full God is.

- > The second aspect of the appearance of the star to reflect on, is that it gives another aspect to the nativity story.
- > On Christmas Day, Pauline encouraged us to think about the humble surroundings of Jesus who was born to be king. A borrowed stable, working shepherds being the first visitors to the family who quite soon became refugees.
- > The visit of the kings is symbolic of the rulers of the world paying homage to the king of kings – but the leading of the star tells an even greater story.
- > With the star we glimpse an angle on the birth of Jesus as an event of cosmic significance. For the house where the infant Jesus was has now been marked out as the centre of an event that is both deeply personal to Mary and Joseph, but so significant that the entire universe become centred on that place as the star points the way!
- > The star of Bethlehem reminds us that this miracle of human birth has a significance for all of creation – and not just people, and not even just our planet, but for everything – all planets, stars and galaxies too.
- > As we shall sing about in a few moments time reflecting this idea:

“Every star shall sing a carol,
Every creature high or low.
Come and praise the King of Heaven
By whatever name you know.

When the king of all creation,
Had a cradle on the earth.
Holy was the human body,
Holy was the human birth.”

> For my third, and final comment about the star we return to the magi.
The word ‘Magi’ is the root of the English word “magic”.

> This is because of the origins of the magi as people from the East – what we now call Iran – who were Zoroastrian priests skilled in matters little understood in those days – like astronomy.

> As an article on the history of Zoroastrian worship says:

“the magi were renowned for their wisdom beyond the borders of Iran. They were unsurpassed in their knowledge of philosophy, history, geography, plants, medicine and the heavens. The efficacy of their beliefs and faith was demonstrated in their actions. Their high moral standing, their wisdom, their ability to heal the sick and their years of learning made them legendary throughout the Middle East.”

> These people were aware that there was much more to life than day to day events. And they used their knowledge across many different disciplines – now this is guess work on my part – but maybe they understood the interconnectedness of people and nature – and far beyond into cosmic events too.

> They were the ones who were on the look-out, they were attentive to events and changes, and that is why they were the ones who spotted the star. And they were the ones who realised that it could be of huge significance.

> Apart from some shepherds and the holy family, everyone else just carried on as usual.

> I think the attentiveness and perception of the magi to recognise the star for what it was, is worth us taking note of.

> We live in times when so much is changing. We try to carry on our daily routines as best we can. But there are occasions, like the start of this New Year, when we get the opportunity to stop all the everyday business and take some time to look beyond.

> We too can see signs, we too can pay attention to the modern day people of wisdom who are alert to events that have far-reaching consequences.

> It was on the morning news just before I sat down to write this sermon that I saw a selection of notable news photos from 2020. It was quite sobering that several of them were of extraordinary weather events, such as a possum being treated for burns after the wildfires in Australia, another of the sky turned orange above San Francisco due to more fires. There was a huge swarm of locusts in Africa too. All reminders of the changing climate.

> There were also several sobering images from the Covid outbreak that has brought home to us all the fragility of what we used to know of as ‘normal life’.

> There was also another sobering image of the ‘Black lives matter’ protests.

> These are all reminders of the importance of God’s imperative for justice peace and the integrity of creation.

> The signs are there for us to see, and with that recognition of these global and cosmic events comes the continued need to recognise Jesus for who He is as God's Son who was born to show and share love and life for all.
Amen