

## **Sermon from 3 January 2021 - Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

Ephesians 3 v 5 'In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind: this is, that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs and sharers in the promise of Jesus Christ'.

At Epiphany we celebrate a radical new idea. God's work of salvation in Christ Jesus is not just for the benefit of the Jews, one race with its homeland at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. It is for the whole of mankind. No more insiders, no more outsiders.

But we tend to focus our Epiphany celebration on a puzzling, but very vivid and poetic incident that only St Matthew records in his Gospel; a story that is rich in allusions to the ancient prophecies of Isaiah, and to which Christian tradition has added some elaborate, but not necessarily helpful details. The story of the Wise Men.

Who were these foreign travellers, these outsiders, who turn up one day in Jerusalem? They were men who study the stars – astrologers. Astrology in the ancient world was not the disreputable hocus-pocus we find in the horoscope columns of our cheaper newspapers and magazines. It was a respected field of research in many ancient cultures, so think away the fur trimmed royal robes and crowns, maybe instead think corduroy jackets and leather elbow patches. These men are scholars, academics.

People who studied the stars. People who looked outwards, far beyond the immediate concerns of daily life to look for a bigger picture. People who looked for distant points of light, people who trained their eyes to far horizons. But not what we might call 'Stargazers'. Don't see them as romantic visionaries.

They charted the night sky through patient, painstaking observation of the night sky night after night, year after year, so that they knew how to recognise the smallest changing pattern, the appearance of a single new star. People who looked out for changes.

Who might the Wise Men of our days be? Perhaps those at our Universities and Institutes who patiently, diligently harvest myriads of data and statistics from around the globe; on temperatures in oceans; of particles in stratospheres; of incidences of infections, or changing gaps in prosperity and opportunity across classes and races. People who can seem remote and out-of-touch with our immediate, local daily experience – foreign to our understanding. Outsiders.

But wise men and women do not merely observe and record. When they recognise a changing pattern, an emerging trend, whatever a 'new star' may be in their field, they know it has consequences. These things are not of 'merely academic interest'. They concern the whole world, even if the world cannot see it yet. Wise people see a need for action. They cannot

simply wait and collate more data. They will leave their ivory towers and start out on a journey.

Just like Matthew's Wise Men, their journey will lead them to a Jerusalem, to centres of government and commerce. 'King Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.' Wherever wise men and women go, they will encounter plenty of King Herods, and plenty of fear. Their new information and their challenging questions are seldom welcome. They bring disruption, they demand changes, they threaten the status quo.

King Herods only hear the unwelcome threats, they do not see the opportunities to embrace change and seek redemption. And every King Herod knows that there are lots of ways to deal with unwanted information.

But whatever response they meet, faithful Wise Men, now as then, will continue their journey. Following the science. Following their star. Let us be thankful that God continues to send us wise men and women. It is often the Outsiders who guide us to salvation.

There is another, more primal way to look on the Wise Men – simply as travellers asking for directions.

If they came asking at the door of our Church, what response might they get?

Firstly, would we recognise them? They probably wouldn't look or sound foreign, they might look very much like us – but they would see themselves as Outsiders, looking in on 'our' religion from beyond its doors. They might need a lot of courage even to get as far as the door.

They probably won't have seen a new star, but something new in their lives has set them asking questions. Bereavements, broken relationships, loss of livelihood, new offspring, new relationships, new homes in new towns (life isn't all bad news); events that start people asking the deep questions about love and life and what it all means. Questions that are not really resolved with text book answers.

Let's be honest, Outsiders with questions can be challenging and disruptive. They may highlight to us the questions that we have been afraid to ask for ourselves, or to which we have not yet found a convincing answer.

Outsiders remind us that the difficult jargon of our theologies, hymnodies and liturgies is not a language they understand, and they challenge us to find new words, new patterns.

And let's not forget that it is very easy to feel like an Outsider, even when everyone else thinks you are an Insider. We need Outsiders to move us forward.

So when they knock on the door, maybe our response should be more like this:

“Actually, my friends, we are all just travellers too. We aren’t ‘insiders’. We are just resting a while in this place on our journey, and you are welcome to do so too. But we know that the star leads on to Bethlehem – to Jesus, the Christ, the Light for all the world.

My friends, shall we travel on these last few miles together?”