5th January 2020

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12

Happy new Year to you all.

I know many of you were travelling over the Christmas and New Year period. I hope your journeys were smooth, your destinations great and the company you kept delightful.

We spent New Year in Cornwall in a cottage that was a treat from you all for Debbie and mines 25th Wedding Anniversary. The venue was great, and the company was delightful. The only mishap happened on Porthcothan beach where we celebrated the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve by failing to light the firework we had brought. Everyone around us was wishing each other a happy New year, singing and kissing and Sam and I were trying to light a firework with a dud lighter. When we eventually lit it, thanks to the loan of a lighter from a bystander the firework flew up into the air then hit a woman on the way down. Fortunately, she was amused rather than annoyed.

Here’s hoping that the new year won’t be a damp squid and annoying but that we will find a sparkle and reasons to celebrate.

Today is Epiphany Sunday when we remember the journey of the Magi to the baby Jesus. That metaphor of journey is a useful one as we journey into a new year. So, here’s a few thoughts about the journey ahead for all of us based on this well-known story of the visitors from the East who brought precious gifts to the new born king.

**They journeyed in hope**. The Magi set out in hope of finding a newborn king. They saw his star when it arose and went to worship him. They travelled in hope and expectation.

The New Year is often a time that prompts an outpouring of wise words, forecasts for the future and plenty of probing of the past year’s ups and downs. In just one newspaper it’s possible to read insightful [articles about the future of the climate](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/30/environment-2050-flooded-cities-forced-migration-amazon-turning-savannah), astute [sports predictions](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/dec/30/predictions-2020-team-gb-medal-england-euro-hopes), and thoughts on [how to rehabilitate the Labour party](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/29/rebecca-long-bailey-labour-party-britain) in the future!

There are forecasts considering [where to avoid for holidays in the next year](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/where-not-to-go-2020-iceland-bruges-kyoto-venice-machu-picchu-a9250771.html), and on the iPlayer there are at least eight different programmes analysing the cultural ups and downs of 2019 and reflections on the last decade.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As many of the reflections and retrospectives reveal, it is relatively easy to be wise after something has happened. Indeed, one of the defining aspects of this decade is the rise in the ability of anyone with a social media account to offer their own ‘wise’ armchair commentary and reaction to events as they unfold. However, when it comes to predicting the future we all know it’s notoriously difficult to foresee what will actually happen in politics, sports and on the cultural scene. The past year has seen ups and downs that were entirely unexpected and the only wise prediction we can safely make is that 2020 will probably hold similar surprises.

The magi in Matthew’s Gospel are billed in nativity plays up and down the land as the ‘wise men’ and unlike the forecasts littering the press at a year’s end, they had a bit more success with their prediction of a new king of the Jews. Foretold by the rising of a star, the prophecy of a significant birth was entirely accurate. However, what they failed to foresee, was the manner in which God would fulfil the prophecy. The wise magi applied their conventional wisdom and went straight to Herod’s palace in their quest to find the baby king. But the riches of the palace, the obvious location for a king, was not the present reality for the child born king of the Jews. God had revealed Jesus’ birth to the magi from the east, but it was in the small town of Bethlehem not the capital city that they would actually find him, he would be in a house not a palace and born to a teenage mother rather than a queen or princess.

Even the learned magi could not foresee that the king of the Jews would be born in a small, ordinary town to an ordinary woman. Despite all of their wisdom, the fulfilment of God’s divine plan still initially eluded them. The manner of the king’s birth was unexpected for the magi and even today, with the luxury of our armchair commentary and wisdom after the event the incongruity of the saviour of the world born in the supremely ordinary is still surprising and difficult to understand. But perhaps the part to probe again at this year’s end is the response of the magi to the child in that moment when they eventually found him: joy and worship.

We can’t foresee what will happen in this new year, we could spend time commenting on the past, but perhaps it is the ongoing present reality of that same saviour king who should dominate our focus prompting us to joyfully worship him right here, right now!

As we start a new year, we may be full of hope for new opportunities and new possibilities. However, we may be fearful, fearful of what the future may hold, fearful for the sake of our health, our relationship, our employment. Hope or fear?

At the end of the year I always reflect and look back on a year that gone and try and be thankful – we made it through another year, we saw God’s provision and care for our lives, we sensed his guidance in our affairs and purposes for us. The message of the angels to all those involved in the extraordinary events of Christmas and their consequences for the future was ‘Do not be afraid’. Life may have many twists and turns and unexpected outcomes – but Journey with hope, because we journey with God.

**Secondly, we journey with others**. There were Magi travelling to see the new-born king – although we are not told exactly how many there were there was more than one. We need each other.

One commentator[[2]](#endnote-2) I read said the last decade has been the decade of increasing disconnection; a time when we have grown further apart from each other; from nature, from shared experiences. A time when convenience, technology and austerity have conspired to inch us away from some of the most satisfying parts of being human. Clare Foges says if we were packing a time capsule to capture the great disconnection it would contain only one item: a smartphone. At the beginning of the decade a third of us owned one. By the end of the decade 90% of us have one. If anyone were to visit us from previous eras, they would assume these ubiquitous rectangles were portals to our gods. In a way they are to icons, influencers Instagram beautioe4s. the dazzling goodies online can make real life seem pedestrian, achingly slow, boring and depressing.

In 2010 taking your phone out during a meal was the height of rudeness; now they sit next to the cutlery as standard.

Social media doesn’t nourish us like socialising and having places to meet real people and belong. I am sure you can find a great sermon online or listen to amazing worship on You Tube but actually meeting up and belonging in fellowship and knowing and being known makes church invaluable in this brave new digital age. Face to face interactions are still vital in an age when increasing numbers of people are feeling lonely. As our fellowship groups start up again, as our various community activities start up again, our women’s guild our fabric group, our eco group etc etc – all give an opportunity to meet with others and find common purpose. It is better together.

The wise men probably encouraged each other on the way. How can we help those who struggle with their journey through life and faith, helping them to persevere so that together we can discover and rediscover the overwhelming joy of being in God’s presence? It could be as simple as offering to call for someone on our way to church or listening in a non-judgmental way to their doubts and problems.

The wise men’s journey to draw close to Jesus required great perseverance. How do we practice perseverance in our Christian life? Do we become side-tracked, as the wise men nearly were, seeking spiritual experiences in the wrong place? There must have been times when the wise men were tired or discouraged, and may even have thought of giving up – does that happen to us too? How should we respond? What habits will help us to persevere at such times, and lead us back to that overwhelming joy?

**Thirdly beware of the Herods in life and in ourselves**. We live in a world in which there are many dark places. Television, newspapers and the internet bombard us with images of terror, violence, hunger, exploitation and misery. There are dark places within ourselves too. Like the wise men, we often look to those in power to rescue these situations; only to realize that, like King Herod, those in power often act from motives of prowess, greed and self-interest.

We can find our own attitudes often defensive, fearful, envious, self-obsessed hypocritical. We can say one thing and actually mean the opposite. Herod asked the Magi to tell him where Jesus was so that he could go and worship him but actually he wanted to kill him and get rid of the threat to his lifestyle, power and meaning.

It took the discernment of the Magi, brought about through a warning in a dream, to stay clear of Herod’s dark influence. May God grant to us discernment and self-awareness of our darker side and how we may be consumed by our sin and evil unless we are on guard.

**Fourthly, make the sacrifice:** Since the early days of Christianity, Biblical scholars and theologians have offered varying interpretations of the meaning and significance of the gold, [frankincense](https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/frankincense-and-other-resins-were-used-in-roman-burials-across-britain/) and myrrh that [the magi](https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/witnessing-the-divine/) presented to Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew (2:11). These valuable items were standard gifts to honour a king or deity in the ancient world: gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil. In addition to the honour and status implied by the value of the gifts of the magi, scholars think that these three were chosen for their special spiritual symbolism about Jesus himself—gold representing his kingship, frankincense a symbol of his priestly role, and myrrh a prefiguring of his death and embalming. They weren’t cheap – they were costly gifts, fit for a king.

The sacrifices we make this year – for what we believe in, what we love, will tell a lot about us, about our priorities, about our purpose. May you look back on the year and think those sacrifices have been worthwhile.

**Finally, decide who is worthy of your worship and may that bring you joy.** The Magi were overjoyed when they found Jesus. They bowed down and worshipped him. If you were here on Christmas Day I did some presents that the children had to unwrap – they contained words that together made the scripture ‘the word became flesh and dwelt among us ‘– but they also contained forfeits. One of those forfeits asked the person to don a king’s crown and gown and all the congregation had to bow to them but the king had to kneel and bow to the baby in the manger. Who gets our deference? Who do we really think is Lord and Saviour of our lives? Our joy and happiness depend on making the right the choice.

To experience the joy of meeting the infant king, the wise men had first to seek out the presence of God. This year I pray you may find ways to bring you close to the presence of God. Having entered God’s presence, may you be filled with joy and hope

God bless you in the New Year.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/105-january-february-2020-a/epiphany/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Clare Foges, The Times, 29th Dec 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)