

If you came to the service here at 6pm on Christmas Eve you will have enjoyed the nativity play which the children performed. It included a scene with three wise men who travelled afar following a star. After the scene with the wise men, we all sang *We three kings of Orient are*.

Now the purists would say, you shouldn't really be acting out the story of the wise men on Christmas Eve because really that's what Epiphany is for. But purists are usually wrong, aren't they? Have you noticed that as well?

How can you leave out the wise men from a nativity play? They also come to Bethlehem. They have the best costumes. And we have two camel costumes as well and it would be a shame to waste them.

And so, we included a scene with the three wise men. And we focussed on the fact that they came from the East because surely, we have to tell the children that wonderful part of the good news of the incarnation, which is that through his Son Jesus Christ, God draws all humanity to himself. And that means that all the differences and hostility between human beings of different languages and cultures is melting away as God overcomes all these obstacles which we have erected to cut ourselves off from each other.

As Paul says: *In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

That is why in our nativity play we presented the wise men as three foreigners, speaking in broken English, asking directions to the Drum and Monkey where the Christ child lay. It is a very important and very beautiful part of the story of the incarnation, Jesus come among us, God with us, God with all of us.

But, although the Gospel writer was very excited by the fact that the wise men were foreigners, coming from the East bearing gifts and paying homage in fulfilment of the ancient prophesy of Isaiah, the wise men themselves wouldn't have regarded themselves as foreigners, because, let's face it, none of us do.

When I travel to a foreign country, I don't think, I am now a foreigner, I am still me. I look around me and I am astounded at the large number of foreigners there are in this foreign country I have travelled to.

So today I want to look at the wise men, not as foreigners, but as people: people not defined by where they live but by their basic human needs. And I want to do this by looking more closely at the hymn we have just sung: *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.*

The first line comes from Psalm 96 verse 9 which reads in the King James translation: *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth.*

So there it is again: *'all the earth'* meaning *'all humanity'*; but that bit of the psalm doesn't make it into the hymn and instead the first verse veers off in a different direction, continuing thus:

*Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him: the Lord is his name.*

All human beings have a need to bow down to God. It's the only way to get any sort of perspective on yourself and on the world. All over the world we can see people who are trying to pay homage to God. They go on pilgrimages, and they visit temples and shrines and churches. They go to mosques and they prostrate themselves.

The wise men are doing what we do. They travelled from far away to a country where they are regarded as foreign in order to pay homage and bow down to the Lord. And we pay homage also. We bow down before him. We proclaim his glory. We kneel and adore him. And as we do so we get a true sense of who we are and what is important in our lives and what is trivial and can be left behind.

I love the second verse of this hymn:

*Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness:
High on his heart he will bear it for thee,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.*

We are used to the idea that the wise men brought precious gifts to lay at the feet of Christ. And we are taught that these gifts communicate prophetic messages about who Jesus is and what he will do. Maybe there is another way to think about these gifts. Maybe these gifts represent burdens of carefulness;

burdens the wise men could not carry any more. Don't we all do that when we come to pay homage to our Lord? Don't we all bring our burdens of carefulness to leave at his feet? Don't we all come with sorrows which need comforting and prayers that need answering? Don't we all come seeking guidance?

The third verse:

*Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine:
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.*

The shadows of the wise men seem to be flitting through this verse also. They, after all, went to the courts of Herod and asked where the child was who was born to be King of the Jews. Which was not especially tactful of them. Did they enter the courts of Herod fearfully? Palaces and kings' residences can be dangerous places. Especially if you say the wrong thing.

But the palace of the child who is born to be king in the kingdom of God is a place you don't have to be frightened to enter. This is not a place where you will be looked down upon because of your inadequacies. This is a place to encounter the truth which will not hurt you and the love that you need because it's the bread of life. And truth and love are also the things you need to bring with you. You don't need gold, frankincense, and myrrh here.

How should we worship the Lord? Jesus answered this question when he spoke to the woman he met by the well.

The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

It sounds lovely doesn't it this place or palace where we can go to worship in spirit and truth. So why is the next verse of the hymn so melancholy?

*These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.*

Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness? What does this mean?

At the altar today we celebrate the sacrifice of our King, his life given for us. Our morning of joy is our celebration of the coming of Christ among us. Our evening of tearfulness is his death upon the cross. And yet in the evening of tearfulness we find hope in his resurrection.

The season of Epiphany brings the incarnation we celebrate at Christmas together with the crucifixion and resurrection we celebrate at Easter.

The wise men bring gifts to the child that point to his death. In two weeks' time we will hear about the wedding at Cana where Jesus saves the day so the party can continue but in the water turned into wine we see the blood of Jesus that flows when he is on the cross. And at Candlemas we will hear again of the presentation of the Christ child at the temple and the words of Simeon prophesying the sorrow Mary will experience at the death of her son when he tells her that a sword will pierce her own soul also.

In Romans chapter 6 Paul wrote this: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

The death of Christ is something we have to embrace if we are also to embrace the life he offers us.

When we bow at the main altar in this church, we are bowing before the scene of the last supper, when Jesus explained what was happening using the very food they were sharing. When you meet again in my name you have to embrace my death, he is saying. You have to take this bread as being my body. You have to take this wine as being my blood. This is what you have to submit to. This is what you have to bow down to. This is what you have to pay homage to.

Those wise men had a lot to say to us.

They remind us of our basic human need to worship God. And they lead us to worship God through his Son Jesus Christ and through the sacrifice he made for us all on the cross.

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