

45 minutes of R.E. either on or off site. This was possibly the first time I became aware in a tangible way that there were differences that were deeper seated than just - 'O, that's a different Church over there.' Not that it made the slightest difference after those first 45 minutes!

Epiphany was celebrated on the 6th January. For us a 'flat' time, as the decorations had all come down. But there was a street procession. Three costumed "wise men" on camels processed through the main streets, cheered on by crowds of well wishers and throwing sweets to the children. It was joyous and happy. The "wise men" had travelled on the ferry from Tangier across a notoriously rough stretch of water. They were being welcomed at the end of the first part of their journey, as yet no thought for the return! Today's readings spark special memories for me.

Reading: Matthew 2: 1 - 12

Hymn: As with gladness men of old (Tune: Dix)

1. As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold;
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright,
so, most gracious God, may we
led by You forever be.

2. As with joyful steps they sped,
Saviour, to Your lowly bed,
there to bend the knee before
You whom heaven and earth adore,
so may we with one accord,
seek forgiveness from our Lord.

3. As they offered gifts most rare,
gold and frankincense and myrrh,
so may we, cleansed from our sin,
lives of service now begin,
as in love our treasures bring,
Christ, to You our heavenly King.

4. In the heavenly country bright
need they no created light;
You its light, its joy, its crown,
You its sun which goes not down.
There forever may we sing
Hallelujahs to our King.

W. C. Dix (1837-1898) altd

Reading: T. S. Eliot - The Journey of the Magi

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and
women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of
shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate
valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating
the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,

And an old white horse galloped away in the
meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over
the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of
silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we
continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say)
satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth
and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth
was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our
death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Reading: Nick Fawcett - Meditation of the Magi (as used by URC for Daily Devotions 03.01.21)

Well, we made it at last.
After all the setbacks,
 all the frustration,
 we finally found the one we were looking for -
 our journey over,
 the quest completed.
And I can't tell you how relieved we were.
You see, we'd begun to fear we'd be too late,
 the time for celebration long since past
 by the time we eventually arrived.
It was that business in Jerusalem which caused
the delay,
 all the waiting
 while Herod and his entourage rummaged
around
 trying to discover what we were on about.
They were unsettled for some reason,
 taken aback, it seemed, by the news we
brought,
 apparently unaware a king had been born
among them.
A rival claimant, they must have thought,
 and who could tell what trouble that might stir
up?
Anyway, they pointed us in the right direction if
nothing else,
 but we'd wasted time there we could ill afford,

and although the star reappeared to lead us
again
 we were almost falling over ourselves with
haste
 by the time we reached Bethlehem.
It was all quiet,
 just as we feared -
 no crowds,
 no family bustling around offering their
congratulations,
 no throng of excited visitors,
 just an ordinary house -
 so ordinary we thought we'd gone to the
wrong place.
But we went in anyway,
 and the moment we saw the child, we knew he
was the one -
 not just the King of the Jews,
 but a prince among princes,
 a ruler among rulers,
 a King of kings!
We were late,
 much later than intended,
 the journey far more difficult than we ever
expected,
 but it was worth the effort,
 worth struggling on,
 for, like they say, 'Better late than never!'

Reflection

The celebration of Epiphany, another key festival in our Church year - the time when the Wise Men arrived to visit the new born child who, as Matthew records was 'born to be king of the Jews'. The Wise Men had studied the stars and had come to the conclusion that all the signs were pointing to a major event - an event of such magnitude that they wanted to be part of it, an event which compelled them to leave all the comforts and securities of their homes to discover what it was. And so they followed a star - not knowing where it might lead, not knowing what they might find, not knowing what they might experience en route.

We hear in both the reflections what a challenging and difficult journey it was for them. Camels are notoriously awkward and aggressive beasts, and the terrain would not have been grassy paths and leafy lanes! Yet they persevered despite the hardships, the setbacks, the lengthy days. They obviously recognised that this event whatever it might be was something special, something life-changing.

Many people across history and still in our world today have followed a star, their dream, their hope for something better, something that will change their lives - undergoing journeys just as challenging and full of hardships. For some it has meant leaving families and homelands, for others it means changing occupations or lifestyles - for all it means stepping out of comfort zones. Hopes and dreams can lead us all into the realms of the unknown. What supports us on the journey is our faith in something better at its conclusion.

When the journey is long and hard, however, we easily make mistakes, make the wrong assumptions and lose our way. The Wise Men assumed that a new king would be born in a palace - certainly not a lowly stable! - and, as a result, ended up visiting Herod, setting in motion a chain of events with dire consequences. How ironic it is that Herod should be the one to direct them back on track! But he encourages them to 'go and make a careful search for the child.' The star is still there waiting for them - as it waits for all of us - leading them back to the right path. What a joy it was for them - and what a joy it is for us to know that when we lose our way, we only have to seek for our star, and we will find the right path again. Too often we allow distractions to cloud our vision of the star, and we wander away, lost in our own

wrong assumptions. We need to keep searching for God's presence in our lives - and perhaps over this past strange year, we have been able to take the time to do just that, to look and to see God's presence in the world around us: in the kindness and generosity of the people and in the beauty and splendour of our environment.

The Wise Men are overjoyed to see the star again and even though there is no palace, there are no crowns, no attendants, they recognise that they have arrived, they have reached their destination, and they kneel in worship acknowledging the child as the fulfilment of their search. But what then? What happened next? Once we reach our goal, what do we do? How are we changed to do things differently? In the meditation by Nick Fawcett, we hear one response to the event - the journey was over, the quest completed, relief that the goal had been achieved. In this instance, the Wise Man is happy that yes, it had been difficult, but worth the effort, worth struggling on to have witnessed something special. Searching for God's presence may be a constant in our lives, but it is worth the effort, no matter what challenges we may encounter - but we do need to keep journeying, to keep following the star.

In T. S. Eliot's poem, the Wise Man is more reflective - he seems to have found the experience more difficult - returning to 'our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here.' When life is turned upside down and fundamentally changed, it is unsettling to say the least. Once we have seen a different way, how do we respond in order to face the future? How do we plan to alter what we do, especially if we live in a world which conflicts with what we believe, with how we feel we should live? The answer lies in our faith, in the love we share and in the hope we have.

We can look back at the past, reflect on it, learn from it. But we must live in the present, respond to it, build on it. And above all we must have hope for the future in our efforts to improve it. God is ever-present in our lives, but we must keep our focus and look for the signs which reveal God to us and show us new directions for our lives. There may be hardships, challenges, we may lose our way - but God will always be there to support us, to guide us back, to help us face the future whatever that may hold. At the start of this New Year, may we look to the future with faith, with love and with hope. Amen

On this first Sunday of the year, we share together the Methodist Covenant Prayer:

A Covenant with God

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,

let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be
ratified in heaven.'

Amen

Prayers

Loving and comforting God, as we enter this New Year in hope, we bring to You now our prayers for the people and the places we love and care about, for the events and circumstances which worry and concern us, and we lay them down, asking that You will help us to focus on how we should respond.

We pray especially for families, friends and loved ones, scattered near and far, apart but together. May they know Your love and share the hope that You, Emmanuel, God with us, bring.

May they, and we walk confidently with You this New Year.

We pray especially for all those affected by the pandemic; those who grieve, those who are ill, those who have lost their livelihoods or their security. May they have the strength to look to a brighter future.

May they, and we walk confidently with You this New Year.

We pray for those working in medical services, in caring, in research, in logistics and administration, helping to heal, to protect and to enable us to return to a fuller life. May they be well supported and appreciated.

May they, and we walk confidently with You this New Year.

We pray our own silent prayers

Strengthen us to become the people You would have us be, journeying in hope with You and in peace, love and joy with one another.

May they, and we walk confidently with You this New Year.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Our offering to God

As we have dedicated ourselves to You and Your service and as we bring our prayers, we pledge to give of ourselves and our resources to Your work through our Churches. Amen

Hymn: All my hope on god is founded (Tune - Meine Hoffnung)

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|--|---|
| 1 All my hope on God is founded;
all my trust he shall renew;
he, my guide through changing order,
only good and only true:
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own. | 3 Teach, Lord, teach us to be patient,
sow the seeds and trust in you.
You will nurture, water, tend them
'til the shoots show strong and true;
hope will spring,
love will bring
life and light to all despairing. |
| 2 Day by day our mighty giver
grants to us his gifts of love;
in his will our souls find pleasure,
leading to our home above:
love shall stand
at his hand,
joy shall wait on his command. | 4 Deepen faith and make us constant;
fill our hearts and make us strong.
Loud our voice and brave our actions,
As we show that we belong;
Through Your power
love will flower,
guiding us from hour to hour. |
- 5 As we leave from here this morning,
may we follow in Christ's way;
showing by our own example,
leading, loving every day:
hear Christ's call -
hope for all -
we who follow shall not fall.

Robert Seymour Bridges (1844-1930) from Joachim Neander (1650-1680)

Adapted by E Plews June 2015

Blessing

As we leave this time together, we prepare to journey on;
We leave to share peace and joy;
We journey in hope and in love;
We seek, we follow and we walk with God's blessing. Amen