

The Star

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

There's a lovely scene in one of the Downton Abbey films where the Dowager Countess, played by the late, great Maggie Smith, is sitting with Lady Merton, played by Penelope Wilton. Christmas is passed and it is clearly New Year's Eve. Everyone has gathered in the great hall, holding their glasses of champagne, waiting for the clock to strike midnight. The hour comes, and the Dowager comments wryly, *"It makes me smile, the way we drink every year to the future, whatever it may bring."*

It chimes in with a passage from A A Milne's Winnie the Pooh, where the ebullient bear is talking to the lachrymose donkey, Eeyore:

"Hallo, Eeyore. How are you?" (asked Winnie the Pooh)

"It's snowing still," said Eeyore gloomily.

"So it is."

"And freezing."

"Is it?"

"Yes," said Eeyore. "However," he said, brightening up a little, "we haven't had an earthquake lately."

Despite the evidence, and I know it's not all bad, experience might want to teach us to be a little more wary of the future than we are. Yet still, thank God, we remain hopeful. At least there hasn't been an earthquake lately. We look with wistful longing into the weeks and months that lie ahead in this New Year, following the star of hope into the future.

The famous story of the wise men, the Magi (from which we get the words magic and magician) is the centre of the Feast of Epiphany. An epiphany is a 'revelation', perhaps of a divine being. Or a sudden insight or intuitive understanding. Only Matthew tells of the Magi; the shepherds are only in Luke. Matthew tells us of Joseph's dreams, where we are given the two great names of the

child to be born: "*Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*", and "...*Emmanuel (which means God with us)*". It is remarkable that as far as Matthew is concerned when it comes to Jesus' birth, all we are told is the name-descriptions of the child, and the unusual visitors who turn up to worship Jesus not in the stable, but in a house, with Mary; and the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The names told by the angel to Joseph reveal not only Who Jesus is, but what He has come to do. And the Magi, go beneath face value, for beneath lavish regal costumes are foreigners, non-Jews, Gentiles, who came to worship the Saviour of the world, the real King of the Jews, not Herod.

"Matthew has nothing to say about lambs, donkeys, or stables. Everything he wants us to know about the infancy of Jesus is in the story of the Magi...By the time Matthew wrote, the predominance of Gentiles in the Church was clearly an issue to be faced."ⁱ Jesus had not been born simply to save the Jewish people, He had come to be the Saviour of the World, to be the Saviour of all people.

In ancient times people genuinely thought that they could see signs in the heavens which followed or predicted important events of triumph or disaster, weal or woe here on earth. The Latin poet Virgil in his story The Aeneid reported that a star led the wandering Aeneas of Troy to the spot where the city of Rome should be founded. In 80 AD (around the time Matthew was writing his gospel) a Jewish historian Josephus was writing about the wars between the Romans and the Jews speaks of a star which stood over Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and of a comet that continued for a year at the time of the fall of the city in 66AD. The heavens are full of stars with possible meanings. It's not surprising one features in Matthew's story.

When the ancients tilted back their heads and contemplated the night sky, they were filled with wonder. Whatever you make of stargazing, if nothing else it reminds you of the enormity of the

universe, and the brightness of the stars call us to look up, and away, from the literally mundane to the literally heavenly.

The wise men followed their star all the way to Bethlehem. Found the holy family, worshipped Jesus, presented their gifts, then, fearful of Herod, departed to their own country, *"by another way."* From heads up and perusing the far horizon and the distant heavens, they too eventually needed the distorting effects of the earth's atmosphere to look downwards, and around them, and continue the journey of their lives.

The wisest part of what the wise men did the day they came to glorify and honour Jesus with their worship and their gifts was this: they realized that whilst praising God in the heavens is a good thing, praising God on earth is harder, and better. It is what we are called to do. Draw inspiration from every source you can, but then translate it into the practical.ⁱⁱ

It's what we pray each time we say the Lord's Prayer. We get it all wrong if we think the sole purpose of faith is getting people to heaven after death. Our purpose as followers of Jesus, whether we are committed or questioning, is to ensure that heaven is found to be working on earth, making a difference now, today, right at this very moment.

Our Father Which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name; Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

Not fixing our eyes on the star only. But bringing our eyes down, to notice what is going on around us; to hear what is going on around us; to pay attention; and to continue our journey, even if it might sometimes take us *by another way.*

The star is a symbol of direction and knowledge for the magi, those racially, religiously, culturally different people who were not Jews but Gentiles, yet came to worship Jesus nevertheless, and offer gifts. The star is a sign of hope and vision for all humanity. The little town of Bethlehem

becomes the centre of human aspirations and dreams, where God, no distant monarch in the skies, is found unexpectedly, or is it unbelievably, in the form of a helpless infant in a manger, needing our help, needing our commitment, needing our work, needing our gifts. Gold for His royalty; priestly frankincense - a symbol of prayers rising upwards; and myrrh, a symbol of the death that is to come for Jesus, when His body should have been entombed with spices.

But Jesus needs more than symbolic gifts. Worshipping Jesus doesn't stop and stay there, right over the place where He lay. The star moved on. The Magi moved on. Mary and Joseph moved on. Jesus moved on. "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Jesus is the Son of the *living* God." Matthew insists in his Gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ That's what the star, and the wise men, and the baby in the manger are all about. Living faith, for living people. That's what this story is about. The question is, how are we to respond?

As our diaries and calendars and iPhones fill up, and 2026 begins to take shape with happy events and sad events; with possibilities of hope and hopelessness; with challenges and conundra for us to face, where might the star of Bethlehem be leading you on towards? Mountaintops and sunny days? The valley of the shadow of death? Hard work and good rewards? Relentless grinding away at thankless tasks that need done? Births and marriages and deaths? Festivals and frolics, or sad gatherings with two or three where tears will be shed. Whatever else it 2026 will be each one of us, personally, will move on.

The faith question, or is it the doubt question, is will be accept a travelling companion to go with us wherever it might be? On the easy-tough, light-dark, hope-despair road, is their room as you walk for Jesus, the Way, the Truth, the Life? Is there room for one who might nourish us and give us something to drink to help us along the road? Is there room for His friends, also on the way,

who might be to you a comfort and encouragement, a colleague in laughter or commiserator in grief?

On Tuesday morning if you're able to help, the decorations will come down and be put away in the Christmas cupboard for another year. One decoration will remain up, all the year round. In the Burne Jones window, left hand side, is the lancet for Matthew's Gospel. In the bottom left-hand corner, frozen in a moment of time, Mary and Jesus, and the Magi, worshipping and offering gifts. And somewhere above them, out of shot, the star. Stationary for a moment, as they are, then moving on, as they will be soon. It's been there for 126 years, in memory of Alexander Nicol, who died on 30th November, 1898. Gifted by his widow in 1900.

In the darkness of her grief, the light of the star. In a window hidden in plain sight each Sunday, the incarnate promise of Jesus with us always; the journey of life lying ahead of Him, and us, when we follow Him believing and questioning. Taking our faith, and putting it into practice.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Epiphany: The Season of Glory*, pps60-61

ⁱⁱ Quinn G Caldwell, *All I Really Want*, pps 170-171

ⁱⁱⁱ Jaroslaw Pelikan, 'Tradition' in *The Melody of Theology*, p252