

Wise Men Still Seek Jesus

A sermon on Matt 1:18 - 2:15, Mark 1:1 - 8 & Luke 1 - 2:21 by Sylvia Sandeman, 24 December 2020

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Tomorrow is Christmas Day. But before Christmas Day, we usually receive a number of Christmas Cards. Many of them, have what I would call, the symbols of Christmas on them – if we look at them we know that they are not a birthday card or wedding card or even a bereavement card. Why? Because of the symbols displayed on them, that is how we know that it is a Christmas card.

The symbols could be a Christmas tree, or candles, or a dove, or angels, or snow scenes, a Father Christmas, or the manger or a simple star – all these symbols tell us something about Christmas.

Some years ago, I was given an unusual calendar. It was called a Christian Seasons Calendar. But the calendar did not start at the usual time. It did not start on January 1st and it did not start on the same date every year. The year that I received the calendar, it started on December 2nd, which that year was the first Sunday in Advent, - the beginning of the Christian year. So instead of changing each month of the calendar year, it changed every season of the Christian Calendar, like our Banners do, for Lent, Easter or Pentecost

The calendar had artwork associated with the season and beside the picture something was written about the art and the meaning of the Christian season. The liturgical colour for Advent is blue, signifying hope and the dawning of a new day. In Australia we have many blue flowers that bloom during Advent - Agapanthus. Jacaranda trees and Plumbagos and the Cicadas, which always sing at this time of year, - proclaiming for me that “Advent is here and Christmas is coming”. White is the colour for the Christmas season of 12 days that go though to Epiphany.

The word Epiphany means, “to make manifest” and the artwork had a picture of a million stars, inspired by Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” painting, with the magi and an large star in the middle of the picture. Interestingly the word “epiphany” is not in my Collins dictionary but you hear people say - “I had an epiphany” - meaning

- A moment in time when something is revealed,
- A moment when the “lights go on”
- A moment of unveiling of something long hidden

Tonight, however, we celebrate the coming of the Christ child. The story that is acted out in our nativity plays, is sang about in our carols, that are played in our shopping centres, and is shown on many of the Christmas cards that we have in our homes. This is the event that much of the world stops to celebrate whether they know, believe or understand the story or not.

But what do we know of this event. To learn about it, we need to go to the Gospels. This year we are mainly following Mark for our Gospel readings – but we did not read from Mark today.

Two weeks ago, we did a Listening Circle on the opening chapter of Mark. Here we learnt that if we only had Mark, we would discover nothing of these Christmas events that we are celebrating tonight. Mark tells us, in 180 words, that the coming One is called Jesus Christ,

Son of God, that He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and that John the Baptist is not worthy to untie His sandals.

So no Christmas cards here, no nativity plays, or angels with paper mache wings, tea towed headed shepherds or wise men in silk dressing gowns. Just a man of the desert calling to us to repent, confess our sins and be baptized

However, tonight we did read what Luke wrote about this story. Luke takes over 100 verses to give us everything that he knows – he says in his opening verses of the Gospel, that “he has carefully studied all the things that had happened, and thought it was good to write an orderly account of them.” I like that statement – it reminds me of John Sampson – he is a man that writes an orderly account of events, he is a “Luke”. So Luke tells of Elizabeth and Mary’s pregnancy, of Mary’s reactions and her response, of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, the arrival of the shepherds and finally how Mary ponders all of these events in her heart. At last you say, we have, the story of Jesus’ coming – the story we know, the one with a stable, angels and shepherds.

But what of the Wise men you ask? How do we know about them? Well – to find out about them, you have to go to the Gospel of Matthew. Mathew tells us all about Jesus’ family tree starting with Abraham. In Luke we find the Christmas story told to us through women, but Matthew tells us the story through men – through Joseph. – “A man that always did what was right” and how he copes with Mary being pregnant and the fact that they are not married. Then finally, the story of the wise men, of the star that lead them to Bethlehem and the Mary and Joseph’s flight into Egypt.

This part of the story is very important for all of us – “non Jews”, and the star is a symbol of that moment, which for us Gentiles and the world, is a moment of revelation – the moment when those of us who are not Jews, not part of Gods covenant people, suddenly know that the Messiah has come for us also – this is the unveiling of the mystery of the gospel - that Gods love is for all people, for all of time, for all places and not just for the chosen few.

Stars are amazing things – for me I have come to see them as the promises of God. In Genesis there is a story about Abraham - “Abram had a vision and heard the Lord say to him, ‘Do not be afraid Abram, I will shield you from danger and give to you a great reward.’ But Abram answered ‘Sovereign Lord what good will your reward be to me, since I have no children?’” The Lord took him outside and said ‘Look at the sky and try and count the stars, you will have as many descendents as that’ “

Many years ago, when I first came to Australia I went out in to the country to a farm. It was night, and my friends were delivering something to the farm. They went into the farmhouse but I stayed outside and suddenly realized that from horizon to horizon the sky was hung with enormous stars – I don’t think I have ever again seen so many stars, or so bright, or so large and in my minds eye I can still see that sky even 50 years later.

The sight I saw that night made my heart dance and it would have been the same as that for Abram – he would have seen a sky like that – those millions of stars were representing Gods promise to him - of Gods gift of many descendents.

So the star symbol speaks to us of a new revelation, but also of the promises of God, promises that are over the top, extravagant beyond measure, grace piled on grace, a sky full of them, uncountable. These days, the light pollution created by our world has made the

stars much more difficult to see but they are still there, the night sky is still proclaiming the promises and glory of God, to those who will look for them.

There is another thing about stars. They are only visible at night. In the dark night of our soul they come to us. In our moment of greatest need they are there. When all seems dark and with out hope – suddenly they flash on the inward eye of revelation and promise, telling us that we have not been left destitute, without promise, without hope. There in the time of our greatest need, we find that God is and that he has always been, it is just that the lights of the world have blinded us to His presence, as it blinds us to the visual presence of the stars.

Some years ago at Christmas time, we put in the upper floor five windows of Rosanna Church building the words - “Unto us a child is born, a son is given“ and left the lights on. But I was very disappointed – you really could not see the words but one day I came pass the church in the evening time - I realized that it was getting dark and the darker it got – the clearer the message was – for the message could only be seen at night,

So the star speaks to us of

- God’s promises and revelation
- Of His presence with us
- How He is often found in the darkest times

However the stars also tell us, that He has had us in His heart, long before we knew it. I heard once, that the light from the closest star in our galaxy has been coming to us for 4 years before we see it. If a new star formed at the time of one Olympic Games, we would not see the light of that star, till the next Olympic Games. So the light of the star the wise men saw, had been coming to them for a long time. God had plans for us from the dawn of time and set things in motion long before we needed them.

So these Magi – who lived in the east, deep in Gentile country, finally see the light of a new star – they were probably from Iraq and though they were educated men, they probably knew little of Israel’s God.

But they knew enough about the stars, to know that what they had seen was important. It had meaning, and that it was necessary to go and find out what that meaning was. They believed that star signified the birth of a king - of a new era. So they set off going to find this King, to the place they thought he would be, where this new ruler would be born. They went to Jerusalem. But no one there knows anything, not even the King. He has to consult with his wise men and finds out that Bethlehem is the place that the prophets of old had said a new king would be born. So King Herod dispatches the Magi to Bethlehem to see if they can find this “king” and when they do, they are to report back to him. So off they go.

Then something surprising happens, as they turn to go towards Bethlehem, the star that they had seen originally, they see before them again.

I have always found this interesting – they knew the star was significant but instead of letting it guide them, they took off to the place that they knew was a seat of power, they went their own way, confident that they knew where a king must be born. But they had much to learn of this Jehovah God who was calling them – His ways are not the ways of men - and we need to follow where His light takes us, not where we think it must be. So as they left Jerusalem, and turned towards Bethlehem, suddenly the star they had seen long ago in the east, when they started their journey, was again in front of them leading them right to the place of this

new king. How their hearts filled with joy and how often have we known that joy, when God's presence with us has been revealed in a new way.

So with joy they enter the place where the Christ child is and open for Him the gifts they have brought from their distant land. Later they are warned in a dream not to report to King Herod and so returned to their country a different way. The Magi depart as silently as they have come. We know nothing more of them but what we know is that they were changed by this encounter with the Christ child, and that they returned differently to their home country.

In the Gospel story that follows, we have Jesus' Baptism - the sign and symbol of that change, that "different way" that new way of life, So we are called to follow the star that is given to us, however little we know of where it will take us. All the Magi knew, was what was revealed in the stars, but it was enough for them to follow where it led them.

There is a story that comes from America about how the slaves would escape to freedom. In the Northern hemisphere they have the North Star. This star is always due north and stays in relatively the same position unlike the Southern Cross

In the years before and during the U.S. Civil War of the 1860s, escaped slaves fled northward, hiding by day and moving furtively at night. Often their only guide was the North Star, which they found by tracing the handle of the Big Dipper constellation, or Drinking Gourd. They like the Magi had to trust the star, which would lead them to a new life of freedom.

Some years ago I took a service at the Austin Hospital on the 5th Sunday in January and spoke of the wise men – I made a star for everyone there, including the helpers. As I gave the star to this particular volunteer, I said "Here's a star for you - you may need it this year". With shining eyes she said "A star for me – just for me" - that year she moved out of her newly built home in a posh estate and moved to Heidelberg West – to a small cement, Housing Commission Home – among the poor and became a doctor in the local West Heidelberg Medical Centre. She needed a star, it led her to a very different place, and that has changed her life completely

Perhaps in the night sky of the pandemic that we have been living with – among the multitude of stars, we as a church have seen in the darkness, a glimpse of a new star. A new star that is calling us to follow it. And like the sages of old, we must let it lead us afresh to places unknown, but there we will find the Christ child, as always among the poor and underserved, among the aged, the ill and disabled, who cannot leave their homes to attend worship, those with hearing or visual impairment, among those who live in remote or regional locations with little Christian worship options, or who are overseas but long to worship 'back home' in Australia. There the Christ will be found, among those who live, for whatever reason, on the margins of our society. There at the Christ child's feet, let us lay the gifts that our small community has to bring - the gold of our service, the frankincense of our devotion and the myrrh of our sorrow.

On this Christmas night we celebrate, the coming of this child that comes to be with us, who rolls out His swag in our midst, and gives us angels and a star to guide us to Him. But He also comes with purpose. He draws back the clouds and shows us the stars, that we may see clearly the promises and the love that God has for us, and the purpose for which God is preparing us.

So in this Christmas celebration, may we look for the new star that God has hung in our sky, may we follow where it leads, knowing it is enough to take us to the Christ child, who will receive the gifts that we bring and we will return changed to our homes.