

Feast of the Epiphany (*Transferred*) – 5 January 2025

Message – Journeys to faith

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, help us to walk with, learn from, and support one another. **Amen.**

Matthew and Luke's accounts of the first people to whom Jesus is revealed, the Magi and the Shepherds, are a source of encouragement on the journey of faith.

Few of us would consider ourselves to be holy or learned in spiritual matters. We spend most of our time on more mundane matters. In pious religious terms, both Christians and Jews would consider the Magi, at best, misguided in looking to the stars for guidance about the future. Yet the Magi turn up, at the focal point for the followers of Yahweh, Jerusalem, genuinely seeking The New King.

The Priests and Scribes are not interested. After all they believe that King's coming is a long way off, unlike the Essenes who are looking for his imminent arrival.

It is not a dissimilar story with the shepherds, they are certainly not pious religious folk. In fact, they are more likely to be scoundrels and certainly not to be trusted.

Both the Magi and the shepherds respond wholeheartedly to what they understand of the revelation of the New King. They are probably fully aware of the inadequacies of their understanding but that does not deter them.

Our journeys of faith are perhaps always a bit like that. None of us has the full picture; none of us are perfect; we are all just trying to make sense of what we do understand

and hoping we don't get it too wrong.

There is a model of Christianity born in response to modernity and modern science that sees faith as a logical worldview that can be fully and perfectly understood. This was the version of Christianity in which I was raised.

C.S. Lewis might be considered one its most powerful and eloquent apologists within this framework and his books have helped many, many, people in their faith journey. Though he operates within the framework of modernity, I often wonder if he possessed an understanding of the mystery of faith that when beyond it and what we consider a scientific view of the world.

This logical framework has led many people to faith. Yet, it is not the only way to faith. When I was going through the process of selection for training for ministry, one of the Church of England's concerns was that candidates should understand that people can come to faith by diverse routes, that there is no one right way, that not everyone will be able to name the date on which they became a Christian.

Churches are prone to moving quite slowly and I am not sure that the reality of the diversity of routes to faith has fully sunk in even today. I am concerned that we are not ready to support people who may be coming to faith from places, and via routes, with which we are not familiar.

I find myself drawing comparisons with the world of physics. At the start of the twentieth century, it was thought that we understood almost all there was of physics and there were just a few loose ends to be tidied up. Aspiring scientists were even advised against studying physics

because there was so little left to be discovered.

Those loose ends led to the development of the theories of general relativity and quantum mechanics. Theories that have transformed physics. Today, we are back in a place where there are just a few pesky loose ends. Though there are also numerous areas of, very interesting, applied physics.

Reading descriptions of the current loose ends, it is interesting that some writers see them as just minor issues while others are very aware of our previous assessment of loose ends. Most of the more serious writers are aware, very aware, of the past and how hard it is proving to tie up any of the loose ends. A new paradigm shift seems likely.

It seems to me that our faith is a little like this. Whatever version of Christianity we believe in and however we got here, there are some pesky loose ends. It won't matter how long we continue on the journey of faith, we will always have some loose ends. What is most likely to change is our perspective of those loose ends. As finite beings our knowledge is necessarily limited. We are all destined to only have part of the story, at least this side of death. We also have the part of the story that we need for our ministry.

So, if we all have slightly different understanding and perceptions, thanks to our diverse journeys, we need something that will hold us together. For Anglicans, our source of unity is our prayer book, an expression of which we embody each week as we gather for the Eucharist.

In a modernist framework, the core sign of unity was having said a prayer of commitment, committing ourselves to follow the way of Christ, with potentially a set of belief

statements or experiences that went with it.

We have such prayers; they are built into our Eucharist Liturgies. The prayer after communion is often a prayer of commitment, as are some of the collects. Each of us will understand such prayers differently. Yet, we can all say them together.

The liturgy itself is a careful weaving together of scripture. Another source of our unity. While we may find some portions of scripture challenging, we all place some kind of priority on scripture. Hopefully, we have all wrestled with those parts of scripture that we find challenging, so we can all say those words of scripture together, or provide an affirmative response at the end, whether it is a reading, a thanksgiving, or a prayer.

Built into our regular worship is the possibility of inclusion of people who have come to faith from diverse places via diverse routes. However, a church is about more than just worship. We are also about fellowship.

Here is where it gets a little harder for most of us. Had the shepherds bumped into the Magi, I wonder what they would have made of each other. Of course, their lives would not repeatedly interact, even if they had met. Here in this gathered community, we will repeatedly interact.

It is easiest to mix with the people we already know. And, there is a time and place for that. But we are also called to be a welcoming community. This requires most of us to step out of our comfort zone and talk to people with whom we are not familiar.

Some of those people will turn out to be nothing like us. At

this point I confess that my early pastoral visiting, as a theology student on placement in a hospital, was terrible and I hated it. Parish ministry introduced me to a range of people with whom I would not normally have interacted. The key thing I have learnt is that people are fascinating. The diversity is limitless.

If we can exercise curiosity we also get drawn into the other person's world and we start to see things differently. At a minimum we deepen our empathy but we may also learn more about ourselves and see our lives and our faith journey in new lights. We don't have all the answers, sometimes we don't even have all the questions. So, very often others may give us unexpected insights.

The Magi and the shepherds both just went with there curiosity: *'let's go and see!'*

Our world is changing. If we don't adapt, we won't be able to fulfil our calling. But in the midst of all the change we are not without an anchor. We are anchored to God revealed in Christ, which we express every week through our worship and our lives, which itself will also evolve as our perceptions change through the new lights our discoveries, of the world and of one another cast on them.

Other's will arrive here through the most unexpected of routes. Let's learn from one another and together create something wonderful, that embraces the light that has come into the world and reveals it to a new generation.

May we all share our perspectives, listen to one another, learn from one another, and do amazing things, in the coming year and years to come. Amen. Amen.