

Star

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

How quiet it was, how quiet, when all the politicians, political pundits and journalists were on holiday over the last couple of weeks. We had news items about a potential breath test for cancer, photographs Ultima Thule, the Chinese space landing on the dark side of the moon, and far horizons and imagination and human endeavour. And of course the Greggs Vegan sausage roll. I suspect the nation's mental health was better then, but now the chattering, bilious ones are back. To say nothing of the Trigger-Happy Tweeter in the White House.

Science has never been a particular interest for me, but it's hard not to be captivated by the news from outer space. The desire of humanity to continue reaching out, as Star Trek used to say, to 'Space, the final frontier', boldly going (no split infinitive please) to the furthest reaches of the universe to discover and quest and see what will be revealed.

For the Chinese to land on the dark side of the moon, the part of the moon that cannot be seen from earth, and to arrange for relay satellites to beam back images of what it looks like, close-up, and with the possibility of returning again, maybe establishing a sustainable space station there.

The NASA probe that took photographs of Ultima Thule is just as mesmerising. Ultima Thule is a classical and historical reference to any distant place located beyond the 'borders of the known world'. At different times it has referred to Norway, Iceland and Greenland. Possibly Fort Kinnaird or Glasgow.

Ultima Thule is just over 40 billion miles away and it takes around 6 hours for radio messages to reach earth.

To gaze at the stars, and to wonder at their distant horizons, and what they might contain, and what might be just beyond where they are, fills life with possibilities. Too often in life we are so weighted down with worry and care that our shoulders bow and our heads go down and we

barely see the ground at our feet, yet in last weeks news, women and men look up, and question, and wonder, and search for meaning. It is magnificent.

The prophet Isaiah, writing in the 6th BC, knew something of this. In a time of darkness and trouble for the children of Israel in his time, who were still deep in captivity in a foreign land, Isaiah's message is not an invitation, it is a command. "Arise, shine....Lift up your eyes and look around." God wanted them, and God wants us, to notice God's rising glory and to move towards it.

When we gather to worship, we are in the company of people from all nations, and of all ages. On this day around the world women and men and children will be lifting up their heads and hearts and voices, to praise God, and give thanks for the brightness of the star that led wise men to Jesus. That is what we do today, and every time we worship. Singly but in company. Individually but in community. Together. "Arise, shine...Lift up your eyes and look around."

When we look we will see the storm clouds on the horizon, and none will pretend that politically and economically this will be an easy year for the world, and for our country in particular. But faith gives us the ability to look above and beyond the clouds, and see the star that led people of faith to Jesus. And in that star's reflected brightness, we too must shine.

Isaiah opens the window to something greater that is going on. God still gathers multitudes to worship, and to see the light. We might not seem much or feel like many, but take one long, last look at our Christmas tree. Topped by a star, but shining not because of one light, but because of the many. Looking for a living parable of what our Church is, and of what we are, then there it is. Shining.

Legends over the centuries have transformed the Magi into kings and wise men. Today is a rare opportunity to rescue the Magi from their fixed places in nativity scenes, and to invite them down from the Burne Jones window that we look at every Sunday, and to restore them to their role as key witnesses to the threat, and the promise, of the Christ-Child.

There is no agreement on who the Magi may have been but, in Matthew's text, it is their depiction that we should pay attention to: determined and faithful people who have followed the

star to the lowliest of places, who come bearing gifts for a God made incarnate in Baby Jesus, and who kneel humbly as servants rather than kings before Mary and the baby.

It is not Herod or the chief priests and teachers of the law that God seeks to be revealed, but to Gentiles, non-Jews, called by God, who have now been included in the Christian community. God speaks in different ways to different people. Who then are we to close off any avenues for God to speak to people across the world and cultures?

We can be led to God in surprising ways and, while for the Magi it was the star, for many of us it will be in the ordinary and mundane things of life and relationships that we will find God's calling. Like the Magi, it will require a journey; often, that means travelling through the mental barriers we have created to seek God. Are we prepared to go on a journey to find the gift? Will we know when we have found Him? The star still shines, even when the Christmas decorations come down. Will we follow, and shine in the following?

Amongst the many lessons from the Magi is the fact that they were prepared to journey beyond the horizon, to find something that was bigger than they themselves were. In an act of civil disobedience, they refused to follow Herod's command, but went to worship the new-born King, and then returned on their way home, knowing that in their searching, they had found.

And in their searching, I like to think that **they** had been found.

In the Baby of Bethlehem, in the Christ-Child, God reveals to the world Who God is and what God means. A God Who is with us, and a God Who calls us to follow.

It may be that you have been following God for many years, but have become tired, or dispirited, or move more slowly because you are no longer sure. In this year of grace 2019 it is time to arise, and look around you, and shine, because the journey is not yet over and despite all the doom and gloom in our world at the moment, there are still roads to be travelled, and wonders to be discovered, and horizons to be crossed. What might that mean for you, this year?

There will be others here today who have not committed to following God. Yet. You are all around the Church this morning, and I wonder, maybe, just maybe, this will be the year when

you make your commitment to follow. In a few weeks' time I will be starting a class for those who have questions about believing and belonging.

I wonder if it might be for you. You know who you are. Time to ask, time to question, time to wonder, time to move towards belief, time to worship and commit.

As I watched the stories from the moon and the deepest distances of space, I was left wondering. What will the next steps be? What will humanity learn from these journeys into the beyond? And it seemed to me that in the adventures and exploration of last week, the story of the Magi was told all over again. Seeking, searching, asking, wondering.

Albert Einstein captures the necessity of wonder. "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science. The one to whom this is emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead!"

In the story of the Magi, on this Epiphany, hear and feel the spiritual hunger and longing. God's invitations to follow, and God's hospitality in welcome, are laid before you. In our Burne Jones window, the Magi remain throughout the year, searching, worshipping, and being welcomed by God.

"Arise, shine....Lift up your eyes and look around."

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

Amen