Sermon

Epiphany 2022

Using the very familiar story of the wise men, I would like us to ponder three questions this morning at the beginning of this new year: (First) how does God work in and through the world? (Second) what gifts can we offer Jesus? (Third) what do we do with the stories of our own spiritual life?

So, to the first of these questions: how does God work in and through the world?

The central character in our gospel reading this morning is not Jesus, Mary or Joseph, not even the three wise men, but the quite wretched and despicable King Herod.

Thanks to contemporary historians, we know quite a lot about King Herod. Appointed King of Judea by the Romans in 37BC and known colloquially as the ‘King of the Jews’, Herod was a ruthless leader who, for example, had his wife and three of his sons killed for fear of their disloyalty.

Given his track record, it is quite probable that on hearing of the imminent birth of a new King of the Jews, Herod would have felt his rule personally threatened.

And of course, we know the story that follows really well.

When a group of foreign stargazers arrive in Jerusalem asking after the birthplace of the new King, Herod tries to use them so that they will lead Herod to the new King so that he might be destroyed.

But having travelled to Bethlehem and had their expectations of the new King completely transformed, the wise men have a dream and are warned to go home by another road rather than return to Herod. Later in scripture we learn of the massacre of the innocents, an act that seems entirely consistent with Herod’s known character.

We cannot ignore the central role played by this horrible man in the greater narrative of God bringing divine love into the world, a love whose contrast with Herod could not have been greater or more easily grasped.

Might it be that sometimes God can reach into even the most horrible situations and help transform them for good? This is not to suggest for a moment that evil is necessary, but I am suggesting that God’s sovereignty over the world is so complete that God can help transform even the worst imaginable terrors in life.

The story of Herod encourages us to look for God at work not only in the obvious places but also in the darkest corners of humanity’s character. Every situation and every person can be a vehicle for God’s transforming light and love.

Nor should we dismiss our dreams either. I find that I am most relaxed when I am asleep, and I find that this means that I am most receptive to God’s voice in the middle of the night. Whether you think this proves to be a good sermon or not, like many of my reflections the core of it came to me in the early hours on morning. I don’t understand the science or mythology of dreams, but I do suspect that we are most honest with ourselves and with God when are drifting in and out of sleep. And as we all know, honesty makes for a good conversation; if that works amongst us, then surely it works in our conversations with God too.

Let’s move on to the question of gifts. The wise men offered Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, symbols of Jesus’ Kingship, Divinity and Death. If we consider the opposite of these as potential gifts for us to give Jesus – in other words, symbols of ourselves rather than symbols of Jesus – what might we offer that represent symbols of Servanthood, Humanity and Life? Servanthood, in place of Kingship; Humanity in place of Divinity and Life instead of Death?

My suggested three gifts are these: first **my assets** for use in God’s service (for all that I own – time, resources, skills - belong to God anyway as scripture teaches us); second, **my flaws** because it is by recognising the shortcomings of our humanity that we can begin to make space in our character for the divinity that God wishes to share with us; and finally, **my creative energy** for it is that which gives me life and brings life to others. The New Year is an excellent time to review the gifts we offer God and mirroring the gifts of the wise men brings it home to us that yes, we have got something to offer and yes – to recall the final verse of In the Bleak Mid-Winter – God asks of us only that which we can offer; and never the impossible.

And finally, what do we do with the stories of our own spiritual life? Well we share them. We know the story of the wise men solely because it was re-told by them and others. You know the story of our faith only because someone once started to share the story of Jesus or their own faith story with you. And each of us does have a story worthy of sharing, though we may feel at times that those stories are too inconsequential to matter, too insignificant to be of value or meaning to others, too small to make a difference to someone else. Given how much we love stories; we thrive on them, we celebrate them, we record them, we treasure them in word and in objects – please do put the story of your own faith journey into words and share it with others.

Today we celebrate this great story of three foreigners descending on a tiny village to worship a very different king to the one they imagined; vulnerable to the manipulations of a powerful King whose ruthlessness was plain for all. And yet these wise men listened to God and in so doing discovered the courage and wisdom to act on what they heard. I wonder what stories you have about being surprised by the nature of God; what stories have you got about standing up for what you believed and discovering God helping you to resist the bullies?; what stories have you got about treasuring that rare moment of knowing you have been touched by the divine presence?

These are just as much the stories of our faith as the story of the wise men and in sharing them they generate memories that hold the capacity to spark faith in others.

May 2022 be the year we all discover the joy of sharing more stories and thereby bring alive the scriptures for our own day and place. **Amen.**