

What A Journey!

(Matthew 2:1-12 – Preached by Cheryl Willaims at Footscray Baptist Church on Jan 2nd 2022)

Later this week it will be Epiphany.

Epiphany is a great celebration in other countries, in some it is bigger than Christmas, it is their Christmas. It marks the visit of the Magi or Wise Men to the infant Jesus. Just like us, services are held, presents given, special cakes made.

The symbol of Epiphany is the star, the star that they followed and that took them eventually to the infant Jesus and his family.

The word 'Epiphany' means manifestation or sudden appearing and I guess that is the experience of those wise men. A star suddenly appeared on the horizon, a star which they followed and which led these foreigners to the child we call the Prince of Peace, the one we know as the manifestation of God with us, the Emmanuel. To them and us a sudden appearing of God. As these men were foreigners, their journey to Jesus and their encounter with him and their subsequent worship of him marks the time which God is revealed to the gentile world, to the world beyond Judaism, to people from places far from where Jesus was born and lived and died. In that sense it marks the moment that God is revealed to the entire world. God's love, peace and justice is for all people, not just a select few, and it is for all time, for every place. It is for this reason that it is important for us to mark the event.

The story of the journey of these wise folk is only found in Matthew. What a journey it was.

It begins in their homeland where they see a star that comes as a surprise but which they know holds significant meaning. We don't know what these men did (and we think they were all men) but they seemed to understand signs that appeared. Perhaps they were astrologers or astronomers who could read the sky, we know that many ancient cultures used the sky and its stars, the sun and the moon to tell the time, the seasons and for navigation purposes. What ever they did or understood they were prepared to give up a couple of years of their lives to explore the meaning of the star that had appeared suddenly.

What a journey they undertook! We don't know how many went. We don't know the kind of ridicule they received from their peers, their families, those they met on the way. We don't know how they braved cold nights and unbearably hot days. We don't know how they got those camels to cooperate for a couple of years. Did they get hungry and thirsty? How tired did they get and how often did they want to give up and pack it in, wondering what they were doing or as T S Eliot the poet suggests, hear in their ears – that this was all folly.¹

Convinced along the way that this star would lead them to the birth of a new King, what did they make of Herod when they arrived at his palace looking for the new king, a troubled man who knew nothing of which they spoke. Did they trust him as they continued their journey and their search? Did they fully intend to return to him and tell them of what they found?

When their journey finally ended, did it meet their expectations? Could a king really be found among a couple of young parents in a shed out the back on the outskirts of town.

¹ From poem by TS Eliot 'Journey of the Magi'

How appropriate were the gifts they had brought with them to give a king – gold, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for burial? Yet those gifts might just have become really useful for a young family forced to flee to another country to escape a tyrant king – gold, frankincense and myrrh might just have been quite valuable and enabled them to pay their way whilst in exile. No matter their misgivings, there was something about this family that spoke to the wise men and caused them to bow in homage, to worship the child, to know that somehow they had encountered God. However, the journey had not yet finished, warned in a dream to avoid Herod at all costs they embark on yet another journey, its way as unclear as their initial one.

Epiphany, a celebration of the manifestation of God to the gentile world and to us. Yet these wise folk present a challenge to us, a challenge about how we might live out our faith.

Are we able to put everything else aside in our journey to understand God more and more?

Are we able to ignore the jeering and mockery of others as we do our best to follow Jesus?

Are we able to withstand the pressure of politics and the prevailing culture and stand up for what is right?

Are we able to bring our gifts, knowledge and abilities to the feet of God and offer them in His service?

Are we able to allow ourselves to be utterly transformed by the life of Jesus – his words and his actions and live for the good of others?

Do we have the courage to go out into the world and give generously of our very selves?

We have lived yet another year of challenge and uncertainty and I suspect 2022 will be much of the same. I pray that we might all be able to allow the journey of the wise men to be a model for us.

May we have the curiosity, courage and determination to follow Jesus.

May we ignore the demands of the world and current culture and put the needs of others first.

May we be transformed again and again as we encounter God in the life of Jesus, may God continue to reveal himself in all we do and in all we meet.

May as Gustavo Gutierrez says – ‘that’s the trouble with God, he does not let you leave as you come. He sends you back, stripped of your presumptions making for home by another way.’²

As you enter 2022 may you find the Christ Child in the face of all you meet, may you encounter God in surprising places and ways and may you become an Epiphany, a revelation of God’s love and transforming power throughout the year. Amen.

² Not sure of reference