

Sermon for Epiphany, 3rd January 2021

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

Who still has their Christmas decorations up? Often after Christmas I am ready quite quickly to take our decorations down – perhaps that is because my mum always has. Really the day after Boxing Day she clears them all away and enjoys getting back to normal. This year, I haven't felt that - I am not sure what the normal is that we are getting back to anyway, so I am going to enjoy the lights and decorations for a bit longer.

According to the church's calendar, it is still firmly Christmas, definitely until Wednesday which is Epiphany or twelfth night, but perhaps like many denominations right up until Candlemas on February 2nd.

We are still in Christmas, still reflecting on the Christ child and what he means but also looking ahead to a new year, maybe hopeful of what this new year can bring.

Today, we hear the familiar story of the visit of the Magi, the wisemen, the kings, to the infant Jesus. It feels like a Christmas reading – it is often included in our carol services but of course the reality is that the visit did not take place immediately after the shepherds visited, despite what is often depicted in nativity plays and scenes and on our Christmas cards. It probably didn't even take place a few days later, in the new year when we celebrate it, but more likely a year or two later.

The magi are given their own festival in the church's calendar, Epiphany, which falls on the 6th January but which is celebrated in many churches today, often the first Sunday in the new year.

The story of the wisemen is well known – or quite well known, there is perhaps a little bit of folklore attached to it - the number of wisemen, the fact we call them kings and the names they may or may not have had.

What we have on this first Sunday of the new year though is a story about wisemen spotting a new star in the sky. That new thing takes them on a journey into the unknown, a long journey, undoubtedly with its fair share of danger, but which ends with an encounter with Jesus – an unexpected encounter with an unlikely king in an unlikely place. We also hear about King Herod, who also hears about something new, the birth of a new king but responds in a very different way.

A new star, a new baby, a new king, a new thing that God is doing.

What do we think about new things? I expect a number of us got new things for Christmas and I hope that was a good thing?

Generally we see new things as good – new drugs to treat illness or new vaccines to prevent them! New gadgets that are better than the old, new babies, new relationships, new is mostly good. But new things, new events, also involve change – a new job, a new school - and sometimes we are not so good at managing this.

We often talk in church about a God who doesn't change, and in many senses this is true. God's character doesn't change - his love and forgiveness and presence are constant and faithful - but that sometimes means that we in the church don't expect God to do anything new, we don't expect change. And yet the gospel is overwhelmingly about change, about new things happening, about a new era of God reaching out to humanity. And it starts with a new baby.

At Christmas we remember a baby – God’s new way of reaching out to the world after so many other attempts, a new thing.

At Epiphany we read of a new star, guiding people to that new child, the new king – a voyage of discovery, a journey into the unknown, an encounter with the new King, an encounter with Jesus. And so as we look ahead to a new year, we see stretching out before us a great journey into the unknown – in fact perhaps we are more aware of this than ever, given the unexpected year we have just had. A voyage of discovery with, I hope, a number of encounters with Jesus, perhaps in the most unexpected of places or circumstances.

I am sure that God will do new things with us this year and most of these things are totally unknown to us as we stand looking forward into 2021. I hope that we are excited, and faith filled about those new things, I hope they will involve new people, new encounters, surprises, as it did for those wise men.

But we must also just glance at Herod today, he also knew change was afoot, he also knew there was something new happening and he responded in a very different way – by trying to kill off the very thing sent by God.

This year new things will undoubtedly happen – to us as individuals, and to us as a church. I hope there will be exciting God-filled things, which take us on a journey of discovery and new encounters with God. I hope that we will respond to the new things that God is doing in us and for us and with us with steps of faith, not blind faith – the wisemen studied the stars for a long time before they began to follow - and eyes and ears open to God like the wisemen, not with fear and negativity like Herod, trying to kill off the new things before they change our lives too much.

Epiphany reminds us that like the wisemen, we are simply called to follow the light. And I hope and pray that in doing that we might encounter Jesus even if it is in surprising and unexpected ways and places, even if our journey is not entirely smooth – just like that first Christmas and Epiphany.

It is largely a journey into the unknown and with a God who does not change but who calls us to change, calls us to new things, calls us to be transformed and to respond to the thing he is doing, with faith and trust and commitment.

I want to end with a short poem by M.L. Harkins

At the Gate of the Year

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'*

*And he replied,
'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light
and safer than a known way!'*