

2019-01-06 ... Epiphany 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

(also Fauls and Tilstock Morning Worship)

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6; Matthew 2: 1 - 12

My kids – the youngest is 25 – are all board game aficionados. When they get together the first question asked is ‘who’s bringing what games?’ We’ve had a wonderful Christmas and New Year as they’ve all been home and for 24 hours we were a full house. They played a variety of games together, introducing one another to new ones as well as playing old favourites but they know that if they want to include me, and I’m glad to say that sometimes they do, then they have to tempt me by offering a word game. It gives me great satisfaction, therefore, that my two theme words for this sermon are high Scrabble scorers both having a J and a Y ... journey and joy.

Even short journeys can be fraught with frustration – an unexpected road closure can cause satnav confusion; traffic quickly backs up when there are road-works or an accident. It doesn’t take much imagination to come up with 1st century equivalents. And the scriptures are completely vague on how far the magi have travelled – were they on the road for days, weeks, months or even longer? – there would have been many opportunities for setbacks, delays and diversions to interfere with their progress.

They set off on their journey when the star rose – a star they seem to have recognised as belonging to the king of the Jews although, coming from the East as they did, they are not Jews. If the star was their guide then they would have had to travel at night so my guess is that they used more, dare I say it, practical methods of navigation to get them to Jerusalem, presuming that that is where the child king would be. From there they are directed on a further 6 or 7 miles to Bethlehem and as they leave Jerusalem they see the star ahead of them.

Having done what they had travelled to do they set off back home but because of a dream - it was by another road.

To a certain extent their story is everyone’s journey – although perhaps we won’t all have a treasure chest of gold. We live our lives, doing our thing, looking in a general way for the meaning of life. Perhaps we bump into the Christian story now and again but it’s not the right time, it doesn’t mean very much. And then one day we have a ‘lightbulb’ moment, the star rises, and it seems that we must track this Jesus fellow down and we start a journey of questioning, listening, looking to see if there isn’t something truthful about him. This can be a short journey or a long journey, there can be setbacks, delays and diversions and some who set out never make it because they get lost along the way. Those who make it to the holy presence are transformed, and so the journey home, back to ordinary living, is by another road, avoiding the mistakes of the past and listening to the navigator who now comes along for the ride.

Matthew tells us that when the magi saw that the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy. They hadn’t yet seen the child. The joy comes like a holy fanfare to assure them that they have found what they are looking for.

Experiencing joy in the presence of God is one of the marks of a believer. It is one of the mysteries of faith that peace and joy can be one’s attitude at times and in places where an objective assessment of the situation would make those emotions unlikely.

We don’t know what happened to the magi after they set off home, whether they held on to that certain knowledge they had as they laid their generous gifts at the feet of the child who was born king of the Jews.

I want to offer some thoughts about how we can guard that certainty, that joy in our own journey on from

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our first sure meeting with Jesus. And if you are still searching for him, they are really the tools of the original search.

I offer these from my own limited experience. I am sure that you have other suggestions that have worked for you. I am also aware that I am fortunate that I have not got completely lost and so haven't had to deal with conquering that situation.

It is in the knowledge that faith can be lost that I often include in my prayers a prayer that I should not lose mine. The key, I think, to keeping on the path is to be a noticing traveller – firstly to notice what good in my life comes from my acceptance of Jesus as my King, both the joy and peace that I receive from knowing I am loved by God and also the good that it empowers me to do; and secondly to notice the good things of creation and the good things that other people do and recognise God's hand behind that goodness. Having noticed these things it is right to give thanks for them.

For me as well, it is important to examine my faith – although much about it is mystery, there is much that is of substance – and it is good to challenge oneself or be challenged about it. Reading the scriptures, maintaining a contemplative conversation with God, and listening critically to what others have to say are all important in shaping one's awareness of God.

I think it is more likely that one will lose one's trust in God if one ignores him, than if one is always looking out for him.

It is a journey – one of indeterminate length and wrong turns will possibly be taken but it is important to keep the destination firmly in one's sights.

It is important not only for our own confidence in God but also because having received God's joy, we become beacons on the journey for other travellers.