

A Journey of surprises

by Rev John A Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 6th January 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany)



Introduction: Who would you most like to meet?

Suppose it were possible for you to meet a famous person, either someone who is alive or someone from the past? Who would you choose, and why? Would it be someone you admire for their achievements or for their character? Perhaps you are curious to find out more about them, what makes them tick? Or perhaps you're thinking of someone you really fancy?

The website www.ranker.com invites people to vote on all kinds of things. Under the category "Famous Role Models we'd like to meet in person", who do you think tops the list? Jesus Christ, followed by Leonardo Da Vinci.

Under the heading "Famous Women you'd want to have a beer with", the list seems to be almost entirely filled with actresses and pop stars. No Theresa May or Angela Merkl, I'm afraid. Pippa Middleton comes in at 111, just above Michelle Obama at 112. I quickly gave up any hope of finding the Virgin Mary! Mind you, I don't know if she would drink beer!

So who would *you* like to meet, and why? Your answer will tell us something about you, especially your interests and your values. Would you like to meet a sports personality, for example? An actor, singer or musician? A famous scientist, or even a politician perhaps? Or would you prefer to choose someone you have known personally, or someone from your family history whom you never met? One person I'd love to meet is my uncle Arthur, who was killed in WW2 and won the George Cross for bravery. I'd love to know what kind of person he was, what made him tick and how he managed to achieve what he did.

Have you thought of who you'd like to meet and why? What would be your expectations, I wonder, of how the meeting would go? What if the person you are meeting wasn't how you imagined him or her - how would that affect you? Has anyone here actually that experience – meeting a famous person and finding out what they were really like?

I'd like to spend a few moments thinking about today's gospel reading in a similar way.

The Wise Men

The story of the Wise Men is a bizarre story. 3 soothsayers from the East, maybe from Persia or Babylonia, show up at Herod's palace in Jerusalem with the story that they've seen a star which heralds the birth of a king, and have travelled hundreds of miles to pay their respects to this king. Of course, this story is very familiar to us – we've heard it every Christmas since we were small. We've probably heard the version that they were kings, which is not what the Bible says. The Bible also doesn't say there were 3 of them, but this has been deduced from the fact that they bring 3 gifts, so I'm happy to allow this.

But just take a moment to think through this story. Why would 3 magi from a far country, whose profession probably involves advising high-ranking government officials, from a very different religion to the Jews, want to visit a baby king born in Israel? And especially as there's some distance, and therefore some considerable cost, involved?

Another feature of the story that strikes me is that when they get to Jerusalem, they are surprised to find that King Herod knows nothing at all about this baby, and he is more than a little shocked to hear of his birth. After Herod's own wise men, that is to say his priests and scribes, have checked out the prophecies concerning the Messiah, our 3 intrepid adventurers are sent off to a village 6 miles away which features in an ancient prophecy. Fortunately, it's getting dark (I'm using my imagination here), and they are relieved and delighted to see above them the star they have been following. Somehow or other, they locate the house – just an ordinary house – and they are welcomed inside and introduced to a very ordinary young couple with a very ordinary-looking baby. But this, they are sure, is *The One*. And somehow the parents seem to be both surprised and *not* surprised that they have come. Then they give their presents – gold, frankincense and myrrh, all very expensive things that seem rather out of place as gifts for this humble family. They stay the night in a local inn, where one of them has a dream that makes them very uncomfortable about going back to King Herod, and the next morning, quite early, they set off home, avoiding the road to Jerusalem.

If that isn't a bizarre story, I don't know what is. It seems to me fairly clear that what the wise men found wasn't quite what they were expecting. And King Herod certainly wasn't expecting them to turn up at his palace with a story about the birth of a king. And I also doubt whether Joseph and Mary were expecting a knock on the door and 3 foreign astrologers with exotic gifts for their new son!

Looking back and looking forwards

Think back for a moment over the past year: did everything go as you expected in your personal life or in the world? Were there any surprises – pleasant surprises or unpleasant? Have you been conscious of God being with you as you journeyed through the year? Have there been times when you felt him helping you or guiding you? Have there been times when you wondered where he was?

We don't know why the wise men decided to travel to Israel to see the newborn king. But we do know that through them God gave a sign to the world that Jesus was no ordinary baby. God seems to have chosen to lead foreign stargazers hundreds of miles just to show off his Son to them, and they followed the clues that God left for them, both in the heavens and in the scriptures. Herod wasn't ready for Jesus, and nor was the rest of the world. Mary and Joseph must have been pretty surprised to see the wise men and their gifts, which spoke of Jesus' calling as be a king, a priest and the one who was to die for the sins of the world.

God works in mysterious ways, but always with a purpose in mind – a purpose for the good of all who love him¹ and also for the salvation of the whole world.

So as we turn our attention from the past, we face a future that is full of uncertainty. At a political level, there's Brexit. On the global stage, we are aware of changing global economic and political forces that shape the world: the US, China, Russia, the Middle East, North Korea, Latin America... The threat of climate change and the pollution of our environment looms ever larger. Within our lives, in our workplaces and in our families, we may be aware of both opportunities and threats. There may be surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant.

One thing we can be certain about: our God does not change. His faithfulness and love do not change. God is our strength and refuge, a very present help in trouble, as Psalm 46 puts it. *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.*²

¹ See Romans 8:28

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+46&version=NRSVA>

The baby that the wise men journeyed for months to meet wasn't where they were looking for him – in a palace in Jerusalem – but in an ordinary house in a small village. But they trusted the guidance that God gave them, and navigated their way to their goal. Their visit told Mary and Joseph that the road ahead of them would be full of surprises too – and almost immediately they had to flee the violence of Herod. But they too trusted God's guidance, and through their love and care the Saviour of the world grew up to fulfil his destiny.

As we leave 2018 behind, let us thank God for bringing us safely through the year, and let's offer our lives and our world to him for 2019, that he may bring about his good purposes for us and for the world. Perhaps as you come up to this altar later you would like to bring to God your thanks for his help in the past, and your worries for the future. Leave them at the altar, and then open your heart to receive from him the grace you need for the next step of your journey, today, this week, this year.

Let us pray.

Loving God,
as you guided the magi by a star and through the scriptures to find your Son,
so guide us, who have known him by faith, on our own journeys;
and give us the grace, the wisdom and the strength to follow in his steps
until we reach our heavenly home;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some questions to reflect on:

Think about your "journey" through the past year:

- What good things happened in 2018?
- What did you find hard or challenging?
- What surprises did you have?

Now think about the year ahead:

- What are you looking forward to?
- What are you worried about?
- What would you like to say to God?