

Sermon preached by Fr Christopher Wood
on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 7th 2018,
at St John's Timberhill

To-days mysterious visitors to the infant Jesus have always had a particular fascination. You and I can make sense of the shepherds without much effort.

Seemingly exotic Magi from the Orient are another matter. I enjoy choosing the paintings on the Messenger as you may have noticed. The very first recorded painting that we have, illustrating Christ's birth, tells us nothing about the shepherds of the Christmas story. Instead, in a Second Century wall painting, we're shown three men, wearing tall astrologers' hats, of a rather J K Rowling vintage, purposefully walking towards the Virgin Mary who nurses her child.

Perhaps St Matthew wants us to understand these are astrologers. After all, seeking to understand the future from what's shown in the stars, was just as popular in the time of Christ as it is among some of the more impressionable and credulous today.

We know from ancient records that First Century astrologers even wrote some of their calculations in myrrh. It might just be that the well known gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh were the working tools associated with people bound up in astrology. When they came to Christ and embraced His truth, then their paraphernalia, their working tools were required no more. The change in their lives was symbolised by leaving the tools of their craft at the feet of Jesus.

The story we celebrate today is one of changed lives. As Christians through the ages, meditate on the coming of these Magi, so they hear the call to a new way of life. Our first reading, tells us how the Prophet Isaiah speaks of a time when kings will come from the most far away parts of the world to worship the true God.

How natural for us, then, to hear in the Epiphany story Christ drawing towards Him even the most powerful people in the world. Even kings have to change their ways and, as the story tells us, to return by another route. TS Eliot puts it so well in his famous poem *The Journey of the Magi*:

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.

Once they, and you, and I have encountered the Christ Child we can never again comfortably revert to our old way of doing things. We have seen the true meaning of life. Life no longer looks the same. Our consciences are troubled. We can ignore those feelings; we can suppress them. But, the underlying truth remains all the same and it cannot be changed because truth is exactly that. Often as inconvenient as it is beautiful. It depends where you are standing.

Now, those truth seekers from the East have a big appeal when it comes to illustrating the Christmas message.

As we see so frequently on our Christmas cards countless artists, since that first early wall painting, have set out to paint the Magi coming to Bethlehem. Kings in rich robes, accompanied by expensively-dressed retainers and well-upholstered camels, kneel before the child. For Jesus Christ

nothing but the best will do. The most powerful in the world bend their knees to Him and put everything they have at his disposal. For generations of great painters Epiphany was a call to refocus on our sense of values. Everything we human beings are and have is to be subject to Christ. Indeed, some of the great Florentine painters even gave one of the Wise Men the face of a well-known Medici nobleman while the faces of the retinue were those of the Medici household. The idea still works. You and I are to see ourselves in every such painting of the adoration. We are invited to adore at Epiphanytide, just like those wise men and to consider what we might want to lay down. The year ahead offers re-evaluation for everyone. What am I carrying that is precious and of value but actually not as vital and important as I once thought? What might I change with the Lord's help?

The danger is that we only pay lip service to such a notion. We consider, with little if any desire to really change. King Herod pretended to want more information to worship the newly born king when all he really wanted was to do away with Jesus as quickly as possible.

Perhaps some in church this morning know the famous painting of the Magi by Peter Brueghel, which hangs in the National Gallery in London.

It is almost a parody on the beautiful paintings of the Epiphany scene that hang near to it. All the traditional figures are there, but now the kings look almost grotesque. It is as if they are going through the motions of worshipping Christ but believing not a word of it. The onlookers in the picture seem to look enviously at all the wealth the kings bring with them. One spectator even wears fashionable late medieval rounded spectacles so that he can see them better.

The kings are accompanied by tough and violent looking soldiers. The Infant Jesus seems to turn away in horror from those who are supposed to be gathered there in adoration and wonder.

Jesus radiates glory and you and I all too often see that His kingdom challenges the standards that we have become happy and familiar with. Breughel painted his Adoration scene at a time when the Ruler of Spain was about to unleash the most terrible violence upon the people of the Netherlands. No wonder, then, that Breughel was cynical about powerful monarchs pretending in Herod like cynicism, to bow their knees before the reign of the God of peace.

The relationship between politics and hypocrisy and what people say and what they actually mean.....We have invented nothing new even in our own Donald Trump era.

Epiphany calls us to value Truth. Those early Magi travelled from afar in search of real truth. When they found that truth in Christ Jesus, they were transformed by what they found. Their lives were changed. That very early wall painting I mentioned shows three Magi walking towards Christ and His Mother. Perhaps the clue to understanding that picture is the fact that it is painted on the walls of a catacomb, the place where early Christians buried their dead.

And now you and I are walking not towards Bethlehem but rather on the journey we have in fact always been on, towards Christ the Lord who will one day be judge both of the living and the dead.

If that be so, and it is so, then you and I must walk both with eagerness and with integrity. We must offer lives that are shaped by our quest, by the grace of the Lord Jesus whom we

serve and to whom we come. We're not just stumbling along the way as if we have no idea where it ends or how we should travel. As believers there are things earthly and things heavenly in our grasp. And nowhere do you and I express better both our journey and our destination as when in this Mass, this simple re-telling of the Truth at the heart of our story, we are gathered up into the life of heaven itself. Your faith involves spiritual feeding here as you go on your way by whatever route. So journey safely. You are never alone.

Amen