

EPIPHANY SERMON

JANUARY 1, 2023

As Winnie the Pooh once remarked when faced with an impossible decision, “What to do? What to do?” I faced the same dilemma when I realized that this day in the secular calendar is New Year’s Day and in the Church rota is the Feast the Epiphany – which to choose as the theme for my homily – what to do? What to do?

As I read and reread the very familiar story of Wise Men and Jesus in Bethlehem, I discovered an Anglican response – could I somehow join these two different observations into one while being faithful to both? And – there it was – the perfect solution right at the end of Matthew’s narrative....

To do this justice, we need to have the background or the back story as Matthew tells it. We all know the story but.... we have no idea who these Wise Men were except that they came from the East; we have no idea of how many there were, although the legend has grown that there were three and that they had names – Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar. So, let’s get these small details out of the way first -

These persons were probably Zoroastrian priests who were more than the guardians of the sacred traditions of their faith. They were also astronomers, astrologists, scientists and doctors, highly respected and honoured by the people of present day Iran and Iraq. At some point, they noticed a unique positioning of stars and planets and, searching through their sacred texts, discovered that the juxtaposition of these heavenly bodies meant that somewhere a child would be born who would rule the world. They noticed over a couple of nights that the alignment shifted and thus did they decide to follow the starpath and see where it went. Off they set, probably with a large entourage because they would be travelling through lands unknown and were uncertain about the civility of the peoples they might meet on the journey. Because they could only follow the star at night, they made sure that they had enough might with them to protect them against all comers.

Nearing a city which they were told was called Jerusalem, they assumed that this new-born king would have been born in a palace like the one which they saw before them. Gaining admittance and an audience with Herod, the ruler of the land, they asked to see his newborn son. Herod had no clue as to what they were talking about and so they explained what their traditions said about this new king. Herod then turned to his own advisors, asking where this possible heir of his would be born and they told him “Bethlehem”. Sending them on their way,

King Herod asked that they return once having found the child and inform him so he too could go and make obeisance to this newborn king, although everyone knew the real motive – paranoid Herod had already killed off every rival to his throne in the kingdom and the assumption was that, should Herod discover where the infant was, he would dispatch the child in great haste and with no guilt.

And so the Magii continued until they found the child Jesus. Entering the cave where he was, the Magii found their kneeling places and just silently embraced the child. Then they offered him symbols of their world as sign that they would be obedient to him and him only: gold, sign of earthly wealth and power; frankincense, sign of the religious world and myrrh, a fragrant ointment used in the embalming of the dead, sign of the child's authority over life and death. As they were preparing to leave Joseph and Mary, the Magii received a vision....and here is the tie in between Epiphany and New Year's Day...

Matthew writes, “having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the Magii returned to their home by another route.” For me, this one sentence joins the moment of Epiphany to our moment right here and right now! Epiphany means, in Greek, “showing or enlightening” and the Magii have been given an opportunity as a gift from God – to find a way back to their roots not in ways that are like the paths of the past but are like Robert Frost's “two roads diverged in a yellow wood” in which he speaks of one path being familiar to him and the other beckoning him forward into a future which no one had trod. Frost says, “two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I – I took the one less travelled on and that has made all the difference.” We in this place and this time have been given two roads to choose from:

a way forward which is safe and familiar and unthreatening or a way which is unfamiliar and risky and uncertain. Which road we take will make all the difference to us and for us. We have been blessed with such a moment of opportunity, a moment which resonates with what Bishop Shane said in his charge to our past Synod, that we have a choice: to shape our future or be shaped by the future – to be proactive or reactive concerning who we will become as a community, as sisters and brothers on Christ.

On this New Year day, we stand at the crossroads of our past, our present and our future...which path will we choose? As a part of the discerning process, I would like to spend the month of January sermonizing about our past, for if we fail to remember our roots, whatever tree we plant here in the future will wither and die or be blown over by the whispered winds of time...I am going to preach on some key moments in the life of the apostolic primitive church and apply them to where we are now so that, as we create our future here we will be rooted in our past, aware of our present and excited about our future. Where our journey will lead I do not

know but that is no reason to stand still and hope for the best. I am not sounding any alarms but hopefully laying a firm foundation for our conversations yet to come and our dreams yet to dream – knowing that the Lords is walking with us each step we take. urging us ever onwards and whispering, “Come, follow me.”