**21st December 2014**

**Matthew 2.1-12**

There was an article on the front page of the newspaper the other day saying how many churches are now holding their Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at 5pm in the afternoon because too many drunks are turning up at the midnight service and are doing too much revelling – one service was even interrupted by a streaker. My previous church in Warrington was next door to a pub. For our midnight Christmas Eve Communion Service, the whole pub turned out. When it came to drinking the wine, as is our tradition, everyone had their own communion glass and when I raised the chalice and said ‘the blood of Christ shed for you’, the entire pub crowd would raise their communion glass and go ‘cheers!’ It always added a certain earthiness to proceedings.

We have been looking at the characters of the Nativity during Advent, and how they responded to the promises of God. How they metaphorically said ‘cheers’. This week we have our final characters – the Magi – or the Wise Men – or indeed the wise women – because the Bible does not specify that they were all men, or that there were three of them – though of course there were three gifts.

Speculation has been made that if the wise men had been wise women they would have asked for directions and therefore arrived on time; they would have helped to deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought a casserole and given the child much more practical and useful gifts.

Three young children were playing parts of the wise men in a school nativity play. At one point they came to Mary and Joseph at the manger and said the following:

Magi 1: ‘here, this is gold’

Magi 2: ‘and I bring myrrh’

Magi 3: And Frank sent this

We wait what gems our children and young people will offer us in our own Nativity play in a moment.

Last week we had the story of the shepherds. I commented on how Shepherds were not educated and usually lacking in a few brain cells – all they had to do was keep and awake and count sheep, although I did point out that usually people count sheep and go to sleep. Yet they are included in the Christmas story to show the God came to the ordinary folk even though the shepherds would not go to make any great achievements or any great success.

In contrast we have the visit of the wise men – the intellectuals, the wealthy tourists.

It has been said that the simple shepherds heard the voice of an angel and found their Lamb; the wise men saw the light of a star and found their Wisdom.

All very positive and sentimental even. What about a different reading of these Wise Men?

One can speculate about the reason the wise men were late. Apart from not asking for directions and having a difficult reading an ancient Sat Nav system (in the form of a star), maybe as intellectuals, they needed more time to think things through, to deliberate. Perhaps like most intellectual people they were unwilling to give the impression of jumping into something too quickly, best appear cautious, one doesn’t want to go on a wild goose chase, or even a wild Messiah chase. Scepticism is a virtue; agnosticism is the only intellectual position of any integrity they may have thought.

Despite all their intellectual reservations something must have moved them and got them to journey from the east in order to satisfy their curiosity. When they find the baby Jesus they offer him gifts and then leave. We don’t know what happens to them next.

Did they, on finding Jesus, just declare in that detached Radio 4 kind of intellectual way: ‘this is interesting’, ‘this raises some important questions’ – but then left without acing further on them? Did they offer gifts as a kind of way of buying Jesus off – here, have some gold, some myrrh and frankincense – very expensive presents, better than Waitrose, hope you are impressed by our style. Were they saying ‘have these gifts – but you can’t have us – we are leaving stage right – more holidays and adventures to be had. Don’t want to get tied down’.

Maybe I’m being a little harsh on the Magi. Maybe they were magical in their commitment to Jesus. Maybe they risked their lives to come and see him and were profoundly changed as a result. But maybe they weren’t.

Matthew includes the story to symbolise how the wise still seek after Jesus. He also describes how others are threatened by his presence. King Herod looms in the story like the pantomime villain, the great abuser of children, worse even than Jimmy Saville.

Let’s face it, Christmas is not really a story for children – what with a sex scandal over who is the father of Jesus, to the massacre of innocent children by a jealous ruler and a battle for power over who is the true King, Herod, Caesar or Jesus? Disney wouldn’t touch this story with a barge pole: it would be Frozen only to be defrosted for an adult audience. It is with a sense of irony or distancing ourselves from its power, that we only let the children tell us the story?

This week over a hundred innocent children were butchered by religious fanatics in Pakistan. All in the name of God. They may have been provoked by the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to a young girl, Malala, for her efforts to promote the education of women. It has been a terrible reminder that peace on earth is a distant dream. It is also a reminder that humanity is always in need of a Saviour.

A hundred years ago, the singing of Silent Night in the trenches of the First World War, provoked solders to break ranks, disobey protocol and to recognise human beings in their enemies and sing songs of peace, love and grace. But it was short lived. The First World War resumed.

In our world when there is so much fighting for power, success, security and unlimited growth, do we long to step out of the trenches with Silent Night on our lips? Does faith in Jesus help us to notice with fresh eyes and prophetic anger the ongoing slaughter of the innocents through hunger, lack of water, poverty, abandonment and sexual exploitation?

The Magi set out to follow a star to find a Saviour. They were trying to read the signs, trying to find meaning in the universe. In my experience few come to faith through intellectual argument alone. Though intellectual questioning and enquiry still has its place. It is very difficult for the heart to worship something that the head has rejected.

The heart needs to be open to find faith. God is often found in the moments of wonder that make us stop and ponder the mystery. Times when we feel personally addressed, called, spoken to.

But maybe God is always found in those awful moments, when we wonder why has this happened? What hope is here? To whom can I turn? Are death and tragedy all that there is? Is there anyone who accepts me, who will not reject me? Is there any purpose to our living? Where can I find a Saviour?

*In the busyness of this Christmas period may you, like the wise men, may you find a star to guide you to Jesus and find faith through him.*