

FAITH JOURNEY

(Matthew 2.1-12)

Introduction

The best present I ever got as a child was when I was about 8 years old. It was a plastic astronaut complete with space capsule. I almost blacked out with excitement as I took it out of its wrapping. I was so fond of this toy that it went everywhere with me; in bed, on the loo, in the bath, at the table, I was inseparable from it – for all of 48 hours.

My mum and dad took me to the amusements in Southend-on-Sea the day after Boxing Day and I left my beloved toy in a dodgem car never to see it (or anything like it) ever again. My happiness was, alas, short-lived. (If anyone is offering counselling after the service I'm just about over it now).

Christmas presents aren't always spine-tinglingly overwhelming though are they? I heard about one little girl who wrote a thank you letter to her grandparents which said, "Dear grandma and grandpa. Thank you for the gloves. They were something I wanted - but not very much!"

The tradition of Christmas presents probably goes back to the three wise men in then Nativity story who presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the new-born king, and I'll come back to that in a moment.

But first of all, I want to explore a bit with you why they went to Bethlehem at all. We know they travelled from the east – but that's a bit vague; I mean everywhere is east of somewhere isn't it? It could be Redcar. In fact, it probably means Babylonia, or Persia, perhaps even India – several hundred miles east of Bethlehem.

And what I love about this story is the way it echoes so many other journeys in faith that I know, including my own.

Firstly, they were people just going about their everyday lives when, out of the blue, something caught their eye and grabbed their attention and they

understood that by following the star it would lead them to a new king. It started a quest in their lives.

Everybody I know who is a Christian has a story of how their interest in Jesus came about – and it's fascinating to learn about that unique spark that led to someone's faith journey beginning.

On the last Alpha course I led, several guests on the course noticed a something unusual about a close relative who had been on the course the previous year and it sparked an interest.

Another was doing the Great North Run and noticed the t-shirt of a runner in front of him with a message like "Do the Alpha Course." And he thought, "Yes, I've heard of that, I'll sign up."

Another was just browsing on the Internet for information about local churches, found a church website and followed the link to the page about Alpha. These were their "star moments" if you like that jolted them into starting a journey of discovery about Jesus.

Someone attended a funeral for a committed Christian at our sister church in Eaglescliffe in February. She thought, "I've got to find out if there's a God and if there's an eternity." It was a "star moment" that started a journey for her.

David Suchet, who plays Agatha Christies' Poirot, was in a hotel one night, and got a bit bored of hopping through the channels, so he picked up the Gideon's Bible in his drawer and started reading it in the bath. It was a "star moment" that started a journey for him.

Most Christians have a "star moment" that launches their quest of faith. Some of you here today may not have really started yours yet. What if today God taps you on the shoulder in some way that starts your quest?

Secondly, the story of the wise men shows what so often happens when you start out on a journey of faith. Their quest is going quite well – when all of a sudden, they come across a paranoid, controlling, pathological psycho called King Herod.

He goes ballistic when he hears about a potential rival and it gets very messy, very awkward, so the wise men have to find a way through all of that and find a way to get back on track with their quest.

That's just what happens. I have known many people on a spiritual journey who suddenly find it all gets disrupted.

A girlfriend feels she needs to call a time out on the relationship unless he shelves his new God thing. A colleague at work, who was previously friendly, starts avoiding you. Family members think you've joined the funny farm.

The quest for faith is not often straightforward. It can get complicated. There are almost always obstacles and obstructions to overcome. The wise men, what did they do? They persevered. They found a road blocked but they were determined and they found a way. And in the end their star led them to Bethlehem.

Can I encourage you, if you're on a faith journey now to not let anything that gets in your way throw you off course?

- Don't let doubts stop you.
- Don't let a friend deter you.
- Don't let the busyness of life distract you.
- Don't let a family member inhibit you.
- Don't let your pride and self-sufficiency hinder you.

This is the most important journey you'll ever make in life.

As C. S. Lewis once said, "Look for Christ and you will find him. And with him everything else." One good look at Jesus is enough to make you dissatisfied with anything else.

The stakes are high, eternally high. It's so worth pressing on and finishing this journey.

And thirdly, the wise men finally got to Bethlehem and the star stopped over the place where Jesus was. And there, they bowed down and worshipped, and presented gifts.

Why gold? It's what we value highly.

- When someone makes a fortune we say "he's struck gold"
- When a child is a delight to be with we say "she's good as gold"
- When people are kind we say "They're worth their weight in gold"

They gave gold because Jesus is the best God could have given us.

Why frankincense? Frankincense is a perfumed resin from the bark of a rare tree. It was lit in the temple to symbolise prayer rising to God. The wise men gave frankincense because they understood that this child was a bridge between heaven and earth; he is the key that enables us to connect with God.

Frankincense is also used medicinally in the Middle-East to treat conditions as diverse as asthma, fever, rheumatism, gastrointestinal problems, depression and sundry inflammatory conditions. Perhaps the magi sensed that this child was going to bring healing to the sick, mend broken lives, and bind up broken hearts.

Why myrrh? Myrrh is another aromatic gum from a small thorny bush that was used for embalming before burial. It is the strangest gift you could offer a new born baby.

It was used at Jesus's death and burial. They offered him a mixture of wine and myrrh before the crucifixion to deaden the pain – and he refused it. Then Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea brought about 35 kilos of it to embalm Jesus' body after it was removed from the cross.

Myrrh has an aromatic, bitter fragrance. Giving such a gift to Jesus was as if to say that there was going to be something bitter sweet about his death.

Bitter because the loveliest life ever lived ended in hellish violence. And sweet because it opens up the way for us to have peace with God if we put our faith in him.

Follow the star, wherever it leads, however complicated it gets, until you find your way to the new-born king who for all eternity has been awaiting your visit.