

NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOUR LIGHT

(Isaiah 60.1-6 and Matthew 2.1-12)

The passage from Isaiah which Sonia read for us is one of a number in Isaiah where the prophet looks to a time when Jerusalem will be free from the various occupying powers which oppressed the city over many hundreds of years promoting the worship of all sorts of gods but not the God of Israel.

But Isaiah looks beyond that – to Jesus. In v3 we have the words which form our theme – *All nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising*. The author is thought to be referring to the brightness of Venus – the morning star – breaking into the darkness. He has already used this analogy in the previous two chapters.

The gospel writers pick up the same concept. St. Luke in the last part of Zechariah's song at the end of chapter 2. Zechariah speaks of *the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the path of peace*.

St. John in his first chapter describes Jesus as the light of men shining in the darkness describing it as *The true light that gives light to everyone*. And, of course, St Matthew in the passage Tom read today.

It's a familiar passage and, of course, lots of our carols focus on it. It's quite a romantic tale. Three professorial types see something unexpected and significant in the sky – a sort of star but a different sort of star - and it both attracts and puzzles them.

They work out that its significance is to do with a new and very important king and they somehow know that they have got to find this new special king and make their obeisance to him – including handing over some very posh presents.

How? Why, by following the star of course. So off they go and they get to Israel and make for its capital city – where else would you find a special king? But all they find is a very defensive, neurotic, puppet king who is no help at all and the star is pointing elsewhere.

They end up finding a small child with his parents – the new very special king. They bow down low, hand over their presents and, somehow knowing they should not revisit that miserable neurotic puppet king, despite his weaselly request that they should, go off back home as quickly as they can.

A lady called Susan Perlman had this to say about those three men of wisdom: *What if the three wise man had been three wise women? Well, they would have asked for directions and arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought a casserole and given the child much more practical gifts.*

Well, it's worth a giggle. But let's look beyond the romance to the actuality.

They saw this new body in the sky and they had to think about where it came from; what it meant. Were they to follow it? It cannot have been a straightforward decision – a journey to meet something – someone – very special but what would the journey entail?

How long was the journey? Days? Weeks? Months? It must have been months.

In the next passage of the story, Herod orders all the children under two years old to be killed so Jesus must have been more than a new-born baby. He is called a child in our passage and lives in a house (verse 11).

So the journey was a really long one. Our travellers must have often sighed to each other 'When are we going to get there?'

They had to deal with people who did not share their vision. Herod's advisors could not see the visionary wood for the biblical trees – they quoted their scriptures in verse 4 but could not see the glory they pointed to. Herod himself was pathologically afraid that a rival would replace him. We see that in verse 3 and the rest of the story told by Matthew in the passage after the one read to us.

So our wise men did not have it easy.

They had a big decision to make – to follow the star or not. They did not know where it would lead them. They had something to go on but no absolute certainty. Is that where you are? Is something pointing you to Jesus but you are uncertain as to whether to move forward, to find out more, to make a commitment. If that's you, on the verge of new year, step out and let God take charge. Our wise men found what they hoped for. You will too.

Our three sage adventurers had a long journey before them. Our journey, as we follow our Jesus star will be a long one, sometimes tough, sometimes exhilarating but always rewarding. And let's not forget, our ancient travellers were a threesome. They could turn to each other for support.

You and I also have a support party. We can and should look to each other for encouragement and uplifting. Better still, we have a pastoral team to which we can turn when things seem to have got complicated.

Our intrepid trio had to cope with cynics – Herod and his advisors who looked only to their own interests. Sadly, our world is still full of them – just look at your TV screens, listen to the psychobabble.

But cynicism was not for our three travellers. They stuck to their task – one might almost say their *raison d'être* – the purpose of their life - and brought their gifts to Jesus as they fulfilled that prophesy of Isaiah so many years ago in verse 3 of our OT reading. *Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* It's our job to be part of

that work and help bring our nation and its people to that light and its transcendent brightness.

I think you may have had one of these little booklets *#Follow the Star*. It does not pull any punches about a journey which takes us through the twelve days of Christmas in thought and prayer.

That journey, like that of the Magi, like our journey to or with Jesus, has highs and lows, joyful times and grim times. If you have not had a copy, see if you can get hold of one.

Our archbishops, Justin and John, wrote the introduction to the booklet. I want to quote a couple of parts of it because I think that, wherever we are on our Christian journey, they are both important and helpful:

Quote 1:

Wherever you are this Christmas, you are invited to follow the star and to be with Jesus. You are welcome. You are deeply known and truly loved.

Quote 2:

Each Christmas we are reminded of God's longing to surprise us with his gift of joy, love and new life. It is the greatest present we can receive and share with others.

We are at the start of a new year but let me share with you a couple of things about the Christmas just gone which have stayed with me.

A couple of weeks ago I deputised for Father Christmas in the hall at All Saints' - for the Toddlers Group on Thursday and for Play & Praise on Friday. I suppose over the two days I saw upwards of 70 children and their parents or grandparents.

As usual, some kids took one look at me and fled. As usual, some kids' faces turned from hopeful to tearful as they came closer. As usual, I had my photo taken with each willing child. As usual, I had two excellent elves to help me. No surprises there!

The one thing that did surprise me is that almost without exception those bringing the children wished me a *merry Christmas*. Not a *happy* Christmas or a *blessed* Christmas but a *merry* Christmas.

Last Sunday, from my virus-induced prone position on the settee I watched Songs of Praise from a huge theatre in Edinburgh. There was a good deal of 'hype', a sprinkling of Santa hats and three singing 'celebrities'.

But among all that was a group of four male singers called Collabro. They sang *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* but before they did, one of them stepped forward and said that they did not think those words were appropriate and instead they would sing *Have Yourself a Very Blessed Christmas*. And, thank God, that's exactly and meaningfully what they sang.

So, as we step into a New Year, a prayer that may we follow the star that is Jesus, not with transient merriment but with great happiness, deep fulfilment and great blessings. Amen.