

NATIONS WILL COME TO YOUR LIGHT

(Isaiah 60.1-6 and Matthew 2.1-12)

Well now: How many Liberals does it take to change a light bulb? At least ten, as they need to hold debate on whether or not the light bulb exists. Even if they can agree on the existence of the light bulb, they still might not need to change it, to keep from alienating those who might use other forms of light.

How many members of an established church that is over 50 years old does it take to change a light bulb? One to actually change the bulb, and nine to say how much they liked the old one.

How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None – they use candles!

Why these dreadful jokes? Because today's readings are about light. Our reading from Isaiah starts: *Arise, shine, for your light is come;* and a little later: *Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

And in our gospel reading there is that star. What is it the carol says about it? *And to the earth it gave great light and so it continued both day and night... 'and by the light of that same star some wise men came from country far.'*

Look at that headline. WISE MEN LOOK FOR A STAR. It's from the Scroll – the equivalent 2,000 years ago of our SUN or the unlamented News of the World. *Wise men from the East have visited the King in a search for a new-born Prince* – typical journalistic stuff linking *King* and *Prince* in the same by-line!

The piece goes on: *'They seemed to think that this star we've been seeing is some sort of portent'* explained the Kings press officer. *'Naturally Herod was most interested, given the fact that he is the reigning monarch. He has asked to be kept in touch with events.'*

The foreign delegation has headed towards Bethlehem. 'We are very grateful for all the King's advice' said one of their delegation. *'We will try to keep him fully informed of anything we discover.'*

The piece then goes on to describe the gifts brought for the new Prince, quoting one observer as saying *'Maybe I'm old fashioned, But I would have thought that a nice doll or some bootees might have been more suitable than joss sticks and embalming fluid.'*

Typically for a newspaper it sticks to the newsworthy bit and says nothing about the visitors' making sure they do not tell Herod who they have found and where. Let's put the journalist behind us and look at the real story.

I don't know if you remember that BBC film called *The Nativity*. We showed it here a couple of years ago in the run-up to Christmas. In it we saw the wise men becoming aware that something very special was going to happen; someone very special was going to come into being - no less than a King.

They made the momentous decision that, however far they had to go and however difficult the journey, they would find that person – a person so special that they would bring expensive presents for him.

They worked out that a star, full of very bright light, would show them where to find that very special person. They made the decision - we will follow the star.

The journey was long and was far from easy but they made it to King Herod's palace – King Herod would surely tell them where the special person they were looking for would be found. In fact, Herod fooled them into thinking he too wanted to pay homage to this new king.

The light of the star led them to the new king – the baby Jesus and they gave him their precious presents and went home happy, guided to do so without telling Herod what he wanted to know.

Here we are at the end of another year – just two days to go. What was 2019 like for you? Was it a good year when things went well for you?

Perhaps it was a memorable one when something happened which was a milestone of some sort – birth of new baby, moving to a new school. Or was it a year you would rather forget, involving the death of someone you loved or one in which a relationship turned sour.

Or was it just an ordinary sort of year when life just went on; you became older and perhaps that little bit less mobile whether in body or mind.

What about 2020? What is that going to be like? Is it something to look forward to with pleasure and anticipation or something to contemplate with concern and even dread?

We know of course, on the national front, that, as someone (I can't quite think who) once said, *Brexit will be done*. But what will *we* be doing? Where will you be, where will I be, on our respective life journeys?

Those wise men saw, and followed, a star, bright and bursting with light. It led them to a baby who, about thirty years later, said *I am the light of the world*. Will we be following the star that is Jesus – the light of the world?

That journey, like that of the magi, may be long and even hard. We may have to face lies and duplicity and people with a different agenda, like Herod. But, if we trust him, we can be sure that God will be in charge and he will help us overcome the difficulties just as he showed the magi to avoid going back to Herod.

What about presents? Call them Christmas presents, call them New Year presents. The wise men brought three presents. What might be our equivalent of the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh? Here are a few suggestions

Our Isaiah reading tells us *Nations will come to your light*. Can we not make that prophesy come true in a small but important way by telling people about Jesus – not in a 'tell it from the housetops' sort of way but speaking about our belief, inviting people to a St. Mary's service or showing our love for Jesus in doing a job for them.

As I was thinking about this sort of gift, I realised that I had missed just such an opportunity the other day. I met someone who I knew had recently been to the Freeman Hospital at Newcastle for tests.

I asked him how he had got on and he told me that the prognosis meant that he would, for the rest of his life, have to cope with wearing some

uncomfortable medical apparatus. What I ought to have done was to offer to pray for him. What I did was to say something conventionally bland.

Present number 2 might be to offer to help in teaching or worship here at St. Mary's. Messy Church is a very valuable outreach and needs people to help in various ways – practical and otherwise.

Our Sunday by Sunday children's work is both exciting and productive. We need to make sure there are sufficient helpers to expand it. Might you be one?

The thought of leading prayers at services or supporting people with prayer in the Londonderry after the services is often a *That's not for me – A definite no-no*. But those who do it started out like that. I remember vividly the terror of the first time I was asked to pray out loud in a group. Now it is second nature.

Our first two suggested presents have been, so to speak, public. Present number 3 is not. I am sure Jesus would love us to be thoughtful and consistent in our private prayers and find out more about him and his love by making sure we make time for regular Bible reading. That's suggested present number 3.

We are not told in the story of the magi how they came to decide what presents they would bring for Jesus but they had clearly given great thought to it because they came up with gold for a king, frankincense to signify a priest and myrrh to mark out a saviour.

Can we do less? Let's each of us pray about how we should use the gifts Jesus gives us to turn them into presents to him.

We've had a quote from one carol – The First Nowell. I want to quote from another – In the Bleak Midwinter. A lot of that carol is rather romantic – pictures of snow, earth as hard as iron and the rest but the last verse is right on the button.

What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I can I give him – give my heart.

The wise men saw, and followed, a star, bright and bursting with light. It led them to a baby who, about thirty years later, said *I am the light of the world*. Will we be following the star that is Jesus – the light of the world?

I bet you are saying to yourselves: *Hang on, he's already said that. Is he going doollally?*

No – at least not yet – I am repeating it because it is so important. Look again at that headline on the screen. Sometimes our newspaper headlines get it exactly right!