

## **Sermon on Epiphany Sunday 2018 by the Reverend Canon David Hodgson, Rector of All Saints Church Wokingham**

The wise men from the East found the Lord and King they were seeking because they went on a journey in faith. They recognised the sign of the star and they followed the star where it led. This meant they had to leave behind what was comfortable and familiar and enter unknown territory. They needed to approach Herod its king and ask for help. He tried deceitfully to entangle them in his deadly plot. They were no longer as knowledgeable or as in control of the situation as they were when they were at home. But God does not fail them in this unfamiliar ground. It is only there that they find their heart's desire; when the star stopped over the place where the Christ child was they were overwhelmed with joy. In the end God protects them from Herod's trickery because they continued to listen and to dream.

The paradoxical language we use about dreams knows that they are entirely insubstantial, and yet we cannot flourish without them. We wake up from sleep and say "Phew! It was just a dream!". But we also speak of dreams and following our dreams to mean that which gives our lives joy, meaning and purpose.

The story of the wise men can prompt us to reflect on our own journey in faith. Are we looking to find the true joy of worshipping Christ, what it really means in our lives? If so this is a journey which may well, indeed is certain, to require us to let go of what is familiar and to enter new ground; to let go of comfortable assumptions about life; familiar ways of reacting and responding in situations, conventional wisdoms. The journey we are called to make may not be a physical one - though for some it is, who go in faith to share their lives and skills in other parts of the country or the world. Such as with the Church Mission Society or other agencies. Our journey in faith may not be a physical one, but it will be a journey of imagination – a dream perhaps we may say - which inspires us to change – to change what we think, what we do with our time and our resources, what we pray for; what we long for, and for whom. God's dream, not only our own. Not all dreams are good or the best; but the dream which God has for us and the world is our sure hope – it is of a coming kingdom of peace, justice and wholeness where all are valued, and the earth is renewed. For some that dream of God's kingdom is merely the insubstantial type of dream. It will never really come. But in the eyes of faith there are signs of it everywhere. Jesus said it is close at hand; it is within you.

At Christmas our church like many other churches across the country is packed. On Christmas Eve this year 1,230 people passed through the church doors. The stories around the birth of Christ have great appeal. Perhaps it is because they tell how God's love goes out and comes in from beyond the boundaries we assume – and springs up in the places we don't expect either - it is radically inclusive and surprisingly so. This thread which is woven through the biblical tradition surfaces here in the story of the Magi and throughout the Christmas birth narratives - God's purpose is carried forward through hopeless situations and in people whom we least expect it to be. God's coming kingdom is not an insubstantial dream - it breaks through just in those times and places where it seems least likely to be present and visible. To journey in faith, we need to go beyond the conventional wisdoms of the world around us, and live with the contradictions between what these wisdoms of the world appear to require of us and what we hope for, whom we believe in.

The guiding star for us on our journey in faith is the love and peace of God which we see in Jesus. Just as the wise men were not called to be Herod's spies, we are not called to be collaborators with a domineering selfish vision of life such as we are presented with every day by powerful bodies in the world. Like the wise men we are called to look and to go beyond the horizons which are set for us by those who would determine our thoughts, attitudes and actions for their own self-preservation.

As Christian people the journey in faith is not a lone voyage but is taken together with others. The Bible doesn't tell us how many wise men there were – tradition assumes three because of the three gifts. But they were a group that is for sure – they travelled as a group. Each Christian community also has a shared journey in faith; a guiding star, a dream to follow as part of God's dream of the coming kingdom of Christ. The Christian community is to be a community whose guiding star is the all-embracing, radically inclusive love of God – a community which is inclusive and loving and forgiving; seeking to make and sustain relationships based on peace and respect, rather than domination or judgement however subtle; praying for the coming of God's blessings of justice and peace for all people. A Christian community – a church which is on a journey in faith together – which wants always to seek and to find and to share the true joy of worshipping Christ - will also be required to let go of what is familiar and to enter new ground; to let go of comfortable assumptions about life; familiar ways of reacting and responding in situations, conventional wisdoms.

At All Saints we have a dream for the church here as a community – a vision which came out of times we set aside to meet as a church community in 2014. Our vision is printed on every Sunday leaflet: All Saints will be a loving church accessible to all including children and youth which is active in the heart of the community and where all can grow their gifts and faith in God." The key words in our dream are: loving; accessible, all, active, community, grow, faith and of course God. Over the last three or four years we have used two main methods, two tools, to help us turn the vision into action, into reality. Or to keep the idea I've been using in this sermon of journeying in faith and of following that dream God has for us, we have used two connected though slightly different vehicles to help us travel forward, to get nearer to the promised and preferred future God has for our church – when I say vehicles I mean metaphorical ones of course – not camels like the wise men we presume travelled on.

One vehicle we've used has been a thing called a Mission Action Plan – it's the simple and obvious idea of making a plan for future activities with specific goals, actions, timelines, responsibilities, resources. So, we developed that plan in consultation with ourselves and others. Many of the items we have on our action plan are now established and ongoing parts of our life as a church - such as welcoming people onto the new housing estates working with Churches Together, the so-called cake-bombing initiative; or having a new church logo and website; other ones included having more bible study groups and to encourage more awareness of retreats and spiritual direction opportunities, all of which are now part of what we do. The single biggest and most ambitious part of our mission action plan is to revitalise our church building – what we now call Community Church 2020, CC2020. More of that in a moment.

The second vehicle we are using in our journey in faith as a church community labours under the inelegant name of PMC – Partnership for Missional Church. Like a Mission Action Plan, PMC is about how we are journeying in faith with God towards the future for our

church and community, but it has an emphasis which is different from an Action Plan. The Mission Action Plan is good, like a road map it sets out where we are going and what waypoints we need to pass. But PMC has another emphasis – it helps us focus on the faith part of journeying in faith; on learning to discover and to talk about what God is doing in us, in one another, and in the wider community. PMC has given us some tools, a set of spiritual disciplines and methods which help us to become aware of how God is working in our own lives, in our church, and in our community; and how then we are being called to respond as a church. One example of a discipline you may be familiar with is called “Dwelling in the Word”. This is when a group reads a bible passage and then shares with each other what has struck them particularly in that passage – so we listen to one another and we talk together freely about God and God’s work in the world and our lives. Every one of our Church Council meetings begins with this discipline. PMC helps us to see how we as a church can be part of the bigger picture and play our part in where God is at work in the community and world around us. So that our journey in faith as a church is not a lone voyage for the church either, it is together with all those around us who are listening and responding to God’s dream for our world.

So let me end this morning with Community Church 2020. This is the project to revitalise our church building to make it a church for the whole community; which will be more flexible, more welcoming, more accessible and even more inspiring. A lot of consultation has taken place and preliminary plans have been shared. There is a leaflet to update you and to call for your engagement with this project. CC2020 is the next section of our journey in faith as a church community. It will be strange new ground we will be travelling through, but like the wise men we are guided by God. I know this is our journey in faith as a church because it is not about making life easier and more comfortable to carry on doing the things we do already. It is about opening the building to new people, new activities and fresh encounters with people and with the Spirit of God. The work we are doing to this building and the resources we will devote to that work we are making as a gift to Christ as the wise men journeyed with their gifts. We will be making this building fit for God’s future purposes of love in this community, ready and available to be used in the fulfilment of God’s dream for Wokingham, fit for it to be shared openly and hospitably with the people, a fit and acceptable gift and blessing for the whole community. The building itself and the project to revitalise the building is not the whole of our journey in faith as a church; it is the road we are on together now. And if I may stretch the metaphor further, as we travel this CC2020 road the new landscape, the new ground, we will go through as we make this journey will bring us into contact with what the Spirit of God is doing around us; new opportunities to share in God’s work in the whole community. Are you willing to make your personal journey in faith going forward be part of our church’s journey in faith with CC2020? Will you give your support to take this project forward – there is a list on the leaflet.

When we are on the journey of faith in strange new territory, like the wise men we may find we are no longer so wise as we thought, no longer so in control as we like to be, vulnerable and yet also free and full of the anticipation of joy. And God is good, like the wise men we have been given a star to follow; these are God’s promises and God’s tokens of his love; the promise that if we seek we shall find, and these tokens of love we share in this Eucharist, which is God’s presence to us in Christ wherever we may journey.

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