

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – January 2022

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

For a group of individuals who are so renowned and so celebrated, we know remarkably little about the Magi. St Matthew tells us they were from the East – Persia or Arabia – and they were apparently astronomers. They have inspired Christian imagination since earliest times. Their background, names and number have varied according to tradition. Some traditions have emphasised that there was diversity between the Magi themselves, as well as between their gifts. So the theme of the Magi seems particularly appropriate for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: their story is of a common response to the divine call which appears in the light of the star, yet a response that is characterised by diversity.

The Magi represent the homage paid to the infant Jesus by strangers. As such, they represent us. Like us, for all their wisdom, they travel uncertainly. They know something compelling is there that needs to be discovered, but they find it difficult to know exactly where to look. I suspect one reason why the Magi have such enduring appeal is not only who they are but what they do. What they do is to show a set of responses that are very human, the practice of which is beneficial to us.

The Magi begin by responding to mystery. They allow the star to take hold of their imagination and they set out to see where it leads them. As Pope Francis

said this Christmas, their secret was the capacity to ‘fuel the fire that burns within us’, looking beyond the immediate and visible, ‘embracing life as a mystery that surpasses us’. Responding to mystery, to the sacred, helps us understand our place in the universe and become attuned to the sense of a God of love at the heart of it all. We all encounter this experience of transcendence. But how often do we explore it? It’s the first thing the Magi did.

The next thing the Magi do is to persevere. They pursue their road across inhospitable terrain and they don’t give up until they reach their goal. In doing so they expose themselves to risk, including the risk represented by Herod. They use their powers of intelligence to calculate the path of the star, they make the reasonable assumption that the place to ask about the new born king is in a royal palace, but they encounter there a tyrant of the first order. The threat which the new born Christ-child represents to Herod means that, in the Magi’s search for him, they become vulnerable to the tyrant too.

When they find the child, at the end of their search, the Magi are overjoyed, and they kneel down and worship him. This brings us to the heart of their significance. It is their moment of Epiphany. An epiphany is a moment when an important truth becomes clear – a moment of revelation. Through it we are able to understand our past and our future in a different way. An epiphany harnesses that capacity which is fundamental to our way of perceiving things: the capacity for wonder. Our capacity for wonder also helps us pay attention to God.

The Magi’s response to their moment of epiphany is one which throughout history men and women have had: the response of worship. They are aware of the cosmic significance of what they have seen. (Cosmology was their speciality, and through the star God had spoken to them in a language they could understand.) The Magi are aware that they are encountering the very love of

God incarnate, and that it is for the whole world, including them. And so, 'overwhelmed with joy', they kneel down and pay homage.

Worship helps us to live thankfully, which in turn helps us to live positively. It also helps us to live outwards, away from our own preoccupations, more attuned to the needs of others. It's the dynamic of the two great commandments which Christ bequeathed to us, that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The final response of the Magi is to offer their gifts – gold for royalty, frankincense for holiness, and myrrh for the self-sacrifice of the one they have come to worship. We ourselves may feel that we have nothing to offer God, despite all we have received from him. Yet as a child does to a parent who has given a gift, the thing we *can* do is express our joy. We can give God our hearts and do our best to live thankfully, thoughtfully, kindly on this earth.

So the Magi offer us a set of responses that can be life-changing: they open themselves to the sacred, they persevere in their pursuit of it, they take risks in their quest for it, they give thanks when they encounter it and are moved to worship, and finally they offer in response the finest gifts of which they are capable. These responses are common to all of us as followers of Christ, despite the diversity of the gifts we bring. For, like the Magi, we present the different gifts of our different traditions to God, in the knowledge that all of them will be received.

There is one more thing the Magi did. They left for their own country by another road. Our encounter with this child changes us. We are not the same when we leave. We are prompted by each of our encounters with Christ to go out and be different from how we came in. For we have caught a vision of what is possible,

of a life lived for others and for God, which will not let us go. And that, in these uncertain times, is a source of hope.

I spoke earlier of the two great commandments of Christ: to love God and to love our neighbour. Perhaps I may end with a challenge for us. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity tends to remind Christians that, despite our real desire to deepen our friendships as we all seek to follow Christ, history is such that there remain differences in our traditions of worship, our different ways of expressing our love for God. But I would like to suggest that there do not need to be differences in the ways we express our love for our neighbour. How wonderful it would be if we could show Christ and the world that we are capable of uniting ourselves in loving action on behalf of the most vulnerable in this world he came to save – the poor, the homeless, the isolated, the refugee. Serving the Gospel by working together to build a future that accords to God's heart, in which all humanity can experience life, peace, justice and love.

In doing so, we may take our inspiration from the earliest recorded common response in diversity to the mystery of the incarnation - three strangers following a star.

Amen.