

## Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany Year A 2018

One of the lovely things about this time of year – especially if you manage to get out of the city - are the beautiful, clear nights and the opportunity to look up and see the night sky. It is a good thing, from time to time, to make the effort and go outside on a clear night and look up at the stars. If our lives seem to be spinning out of control, when things seem overwhelming and all too much, when we feel our problems and our issues and our difficulties are swamping us, then perhaps the easiest remedy is a glance to the stars. When we need perspective, it can really help to just appreciate the night sky. Just looking up for a while and considering the vast expanse of the universe can help remind us that in the scheme of things we are actually quite small. Even if we sometimes behave as if we are the centre of the universe, it is good to be reminded we actually aren't... It is good from time to time to stop in our busyness and to pause and to go outside, to look out and look up...

This looking out and looking up is such a great picture of what it means to be a person of faith - to believe and trust God. Looking out and looking up draws us away from ourselves, from just looking inwards. It's very easy to be selfish, to just worry about the things that worry me, to get bogged down, and to even imagine that I'm the one with all the answers. But in looking up and looking out we show our willingness *to be guided*; we show that we look to something *outside* ourselves. Still, we know it can be a tricky business to trust God, to trust the signs and pointers he gives.

On this feast of the Epiphany we are mindful of the wise men. They too surely knew the tricky business of trusting the signs and pointers given by God as they left home, travelled through a foreign country and had to negotiate an awkward political situation. As the story is told to us, they followed a star, *trusted* that sign to lead them. But it was in their looking up and looking out they were brought to the Christ Child. This is an essential aspect to authentic faith. Looking up and looking out is not just for perspective; not just to give us a renewed sense of peace and calm; not just so we get a sense of our small place in the bigger picture. We do not simply look out and up for reassuring feelings of something bigger than ourselves.

No. We look up and look out to be guided, to be led, to be brought to truth and light and life. Christians confess that Christ, light to the gentiles, light to all the nations, is indeed that light, that truth and life. In this, the wise men are a true model of faith. Their looking up and looking out was *intentional*; it had a focus. Their following of the star was not some vain wandering. It was to the Christ. While they may have had confidence in their knowledge, and in their wisdom, there was a gap that was not met, a hole in their wisdom and their knowledge. While they may have enjoyed a level of self assurance in their accomplishments, there was something not satisfied. It shows, then, the humility of these men who *left* what was familiar and safe to *search* for the Christ child. It shows their humility in that they were *open* to something more. It shows their humility in their acknowledging they didn't have all the answers, despite their sophistication and we might suppose superiority. With all our technological advancements, and a culture where reason reigns supreme, when religion and faith are so often treated as misguided

superstition, perhaps we can be reassured and encouraged and indeed challenged by the humility of the wise men. No matter how good we think we are, we are incomplete if we do not allow room for God.

It is God, and God alone who fulfils our searching, our wanderings. The wise men, then, beautifully exemplify the spirit of humility that is at the heart of authentic faith. This spirit of humility is further reflected in the Gospel when it tells that when the wise men find the Christ child they fell *'to their knees and did him homage.'* In almost all depictions in western art of this scene this detail is depicted, with one or more of the wise men kneeling in prayer and adoration before the fulfilment of their longing. And often in art the wise men - often understood as kings - remove their crowns and lay them at the feet of the Christ Child.

This *kneeling in homage* is really what it is all about. The whole story hinges on that one detail. Indeed, it is this *one detail* that captures the whole purpose of the Gospel; this *one detail* capturing all of what it means to be a person of authentic faith: that this child is worthy not simply of respect or honour or accolades, even of great treasure. *The child is worthy of our worship.*

What is translated as *fall to their knees* is better captured with word 'prostrate'. They *fall* before him in worship. Their looking up and looking out; their being guided and being led; their leaving security and familiarity is all *to worship*. My brothers and sisters, worship is not incidental or accidental to Christian life: it is *essential!* And it is the only thing that Christians can do that no one else can. It is what marks and distinguishes us as Christian.

In many parts of the church today there is a crisis in how we are to approach and understand worship. So often we become embarrassed or apologetic about our worship. But really, so much of the angst comes because we have altered our focus: rather than God being the *sole and only* object of our worship, so often we make it about us. This is deeply problematic. Because, having taken our eyes and hearts off God as the proper focus of our worship it becomes what we like, what our preferences are. Worship, then, only matters if it speaks to *us*, if it fulfils *us*. And if it doesn't speak to us or fulfil us we either move on to something else, or give up on it altogether. And we load onto worship issues such as what might bring more people to church, what might make church more relevant, what will make the faith more attractive to people? These are all important issues and questions to ask, but they cannot be addressed through the church's worship. It is expecting worship to do something it is not intended to do, and can never do. And so, by and large it fails, as experiments in the western church have shown these past 60 or so years. Worship can only be directed toward God and if the focus shifts - to an agenda, to a plan, to a particular style, to an evangelistic program - then it becomes something else altogether.

We would do well to once more take to heart the disposition of the wise men. They were searching for truth and meaning - as we all are. While we have never been wealthier, healthier or with more leisure and comfort, we live in a world where so many are searching for meaning and struggling with emptiness. We might see the wise men as patrons for our age. In their looking out and up to something beyond themselves they allowed themselves to be

guided, to be led. And their yearning and searching was fulfilled when they came to the Christ child - light to the nations. And on their knees, in humble worship their longing was fulfilled. True worship fulfills what we were created for. It is *the sign* of our ultimate destiny. For all of us, as we search for truth, for light and life we will *only* find it in humble worship. Amen.