

Epiphany- 1st January 2017

Matthew 2: 1-12

Journeys

That carol, 'We three kings', has a lot to answer for.

As well as changing them from wise men to kings, they even have exotic names: Melchior, Gaspar, Balthazar!

The Christmas story isn't complete until they arrive, dressed in purple and gold, wearing rich jewelled turbans, carrying exotic gifts; camels and servants following behind...

Matthew calls them wise men, originally *magi* or astrologers- but we need them to be kings, because we need them to kneel in homage to the new-born King, the Son of God, who comes to enter in a new reign of peace and love.

They answer that deep need in ourselves to worship God, born among us in human form.

Another essential part of the story is the 'wondrous' star, although Matthew doesn't say it was any bigger than a normal star, just that they had seen it at its rising.

What wouldn't we give for a star to lead us so we could be sure we're travelling in the right direction?

Thinking about navigating by a star reminds me of other navigators.

At school I learnt about the famous sea captains, Abel Tasman and James Cook, who explored the Southern Pacific Oceans.

But back then we didn't learn about the greatest navigators of all, the ancient peoples who populated the Pacific Islands we now call Oceania.

Originating from Southern Asia, they gradually spread across the islands of the Pacific basin, finally reaching *Aotearoa/New Zealand*.

With our modern-day thinking, we might imagine that they were primitive people who found land by accident, when they were blown off -course on fishing expeditions, but the situation was very different.

Pressure of population always leads island dwellers to seek more land. Pacific peoples were no different. Their explorations were planned very carefully and they had sophisticated navigation techniques.

People still use the positions of known stars to navigate by, but there are other signs.

Birds, flying out to sea at sunrise to fish, then returning to their nests at sunset are a sure sign of land close by, and following the pathways of migrating birds such as the Shining Cuckoo may have helped in the discovery of new lands.

At the beginning of each winter, *whales* travel in family groups, migrating north from Antarctica to the Pacific, returning south in November and December. People living along their routes discovered that following them would lead to land, since whales calve in the calmer waters off islands or larger land masses.

Whales are easy to follow because they're well within the cruising speed of a double-hulled canoe (or a Kaikoura whale watcher!).

If you saw the movie '*Whale Rider*' you'll remember that according to Māori oral traditions, whales guided canoes to New Zealand.

Clouds are also land indicators. They're higher, thicker, and slower -moving over land than clouds over the sea. Hence the Maori name *Aotearoa*, 'land of the long white cloud'.

Finally, the sea itself provided useful signs with distinctive wave patterns and currents, changes in colour, and the 'scent of land', with floating driftwood and leaves all suggesting land nearby.

So where am I heading with all this?

As the time approaches for John, and me to leave for our new home, journeying has been very much on my mind.

The basic elements of making a long journey haven't changed since ancient times. Journeying requires careful planning.

We need to know the purpose of our journey, where we're going, how we're going to get there, and what we will need, both along the way, and when we arrive.

Of course, this is also true of our faith journeys, both as individuals and as church.

It's easy enough to see where we've come from.

As Christians, our purpose is clear, as is our ultimate destination.

But it's always helpful to ask ourselves these questions afresh, at the beginning of a new year.

New times call for new knowledge, new ways of journeying.

Those techniques Pacific navigators learnt served them well for thousands of years, but they're not the techniques that modern navigators use.

As church, our ways of doing things have served us well in past years, but we will need to be looking at new ways for the years ahead.

Returning to the old St Peter's will be wonderful, but it's not enough of itself. It must be accompanied by new mission initiatives – new ways of reaching out to our fast-growing neighbourhood.

What are the signs that tell us we're heading in the right direction?

What are the tides and currents in our society?

Are we offering a clear way forward which speaks to younger people and new Christians, or are we just looking back to the past, keeping things going the way they've always been?

The wise men set out on a difficult journey.

They planned it carefully, but they also needed to change their plans when they made fresh discoveries.

Matthew says; *'They returned to their own country by another road'*.

Their experience led them to change their minds.

What fresh discoveries require a change in our thinking?

Let's put aside those old images of kings on camels bearing gifts and see a different picture.

A group of scholars, probably well past middle age, more at home in a quiet study than in a king's court, travel hundreds of miles across difficult terrain into a hostile foreign country, led only by their faith.

When they finally arrive at their destination, travel stained, and exhausted, they find the child they've been looking for, in totally unexpected circumstances. They're overwhelmed with joy and kneel before him bringing gifts.

Then, with no star to guide them this time, a dream warns them to go home another way.

Could we follow their example I wonder?

Could we set out in faith as we begin a new year, on a journey that leads us who knows where, guided only by our faith?

And will we recognise the Christ child when we find him, in totally unexpected circumstances?

And may we too, be overwhelmed with joy, worship him, and give him the gift of our loving hearts. Amen

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