

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Feast of the Epiphany
SUNDAY 4 JANUARY 2026
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Venerable Vanessa Herrick

isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2 1-12

Christmas cards are going out of fashion.

But amongst those which have caught my eye are two that are particularly relevant for today, the Feast of the Epiphany. The first depicts three women, wearing crowns, and the caption reads:

“Three wise women would have....

- asked directions
- arrived on time
- helped deliver the baby
- brought practical gifts
- cleaned the stable
- made a casserole

and there would be peace on earth.”

However, it was the words on another card, received more than three decades ago – and long before the niceties of political correctness – which have stayed with me, and which I still ponder, especially in this season of the year. And that card reads, simply:

“Wise men still seek him.....

Wise men - and of course women – still seek him.”

So what might this familiar story, this familiar scene on Christmas cards; in parish cribs and nativity sets; in children’s nativity plays – what might this familiar story have to say to us today? And, more particularly, what might we reflect upon in regard, not to a physical journey such as the Magi made, but to our spiritual journeys as twenty-first century followers of a Star?

Let me offer four words, four actions the wise men took, which might help us:

Searching, Questioning, Seeking, Offering

First, Searching.

Whatever it was that first prompted these astronomers and sages to set out on their journey – and there are many theories about exactly which star or planet they might have seen – their curiosity was clearly aroused, such that they were compelled to leave the comfort of their own country or countries, to find out what star it was. There was an inner urge, a passion, a desire which nothing else could satisfy. They had to make the journey – whatever it might cost them – and they had to

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find what they were looking for. They didn't know exactly where they would end up, but they didn't care. They had to go. They had to search.

I'm reminded of the kind of instinct that must have made the explorers of the fourteenth, fifteenth and eighteenth centuries sail the oceans to find undiscovered continents – Columbus, Vasco da Gama, James Cooke. Or the intrepid missionary explorers of Africa – David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley – who were willing to risk everything in their search of a distant goal. The urge to search and to discover is embedded deeply in the human psyche, the human soul.

If we allow ourselves to be, we are a searching people.

Second, Questioning.

The research had already begun. The wise men knew they were looking for a King. But when we first meet them in this morning's Gospel reading, they're asking a question: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Their searching had reached a new stage. So, they go to the obvious place – a royal palace – and try to find out more. What happens (on the surface at least) seems helpful. But, as we know, Herod's responses are motivated by his own anxiety and fear. Trickery and deceit is in the air.

To our minds (because we know what happens next) there's a certain naivety about the wise men going to a royal palace to find the 'king of the Jews'. Yet they are clear in their intent. They want to pay this new king homage. They want to worship him. And the only way they can do this is to ask questions of those who might know the answers. They need to know how to find him. And they go to the obvious place. The urge to ask questions begins almost as soon as a child begins to speak and continues throughout our lives. Indeed, if you think about it, if we don't ask questions, we will find it very hard to survive.

If we allow ourselves to be, we are – and must be - a questioning people.

Third, Seeking.

One of the striking things about this story is that the wise men persevered. They were looking not only for a star and a child, but for meaning. They could have asked their questions of Herod (and his chief priest and scribes) and then turned back to their home country. Instead, they pressed on. They continued on their journey. They were not just 'searching' - they were 'seeking'. The physical action-focused task of travelling to Jerusalem in search of a star morphed into a much deeper, desire-focused intent and longing to find the child-King and to worship him.

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I'm reminded of the first time I visit the Holy Land – an experience, perhaps that will resonate for some of you – when the stories from the Gospels which I'd learned from childhood, suddenly made sense and took on new meaning because I was physically there in the place where Jesus and his followers had lived and walked. What I had known about became something I 'knew' in a completely different way. Head moved into heart. The urge to find meaning, and not just knowledge, is what makes us human.

If we allow ourselves to be, we are a seeking people.

Fourth, Offering.

The Gospel tells us that the star stopped; the wise men were overwhelmed with joy; they entered the house and “they saw the child”. No longer were they searching or questioning or seeking. No longer were they following a star. No longer were they trying to unravel ancient mysteries and prophecies. And they found him in a place they would never have expected – a simple abode, no wealth or ostentation, no servants or nannies, no royal security guards or ministerial advisers. An ordinary place, on an ordinary day – the first visitors who were not from the House of Israel, the first revelation of the Christ to aliens and strangers, to the Gentiles, to people like us....

They simply knelt at the feet of a child with his mother, and -overwhelmed with joy – worshipped him and offered him the gifts they had carried for many, many miles and many, many days and weeks – even years. And even more than their physical gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they offered him themselves. The urge to offer ourselves – so often hidden – is deep within each of us, for we are made in the image of God.

If we allow ourselves to be, we are an offering people – and sometimes, even a self-offering people...

Searching
Questioning
Seeking
Offering

I began this sermon with words from a Christmas card from over thirty years ago:

Wise men still seek him.

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As we begin a new year and set out on the next stage of our personal and corporate spiritual journey, I wonder whether that phrase, and the courage, questioning, perseverance and joy of the wise men, might inspire and encourage us?

For if we are, indeed, a journeying people then, in faith and by God's grace, we will still be searching for the light of Christ; we will still be questioning where we may find him in our daily living; we will still be seeking him in unexpected places; we will still be kneeling at his feet, worshipping him, and offering our costly gifts in his service. And the cycle will continue, again and again, as we are confronted and challenged by the joys and sorrows of being Christians in the turmoil and unpredictability of this present world. That is our calling for the coming year. That – if we allow it and desire it – is our spiritual journey. That is our joy and our delight.

Searching; Questioning; Seeking; Offering

The story of the wise men is our story too. Day by day, week by week, Sunday by Sunday. It's tough. It doesn't always make sense. The questions we ask can lead us into difficult places – even into personal danger. Sometimes we will find God where we least expect to find him – in the poor, in the vulnerable, the un-loved and the un-loveable. And sometimes God will lead us home by a different path. But lead us he will until we, like the wise men kneel at his feet and worship him with all that we have and all that we are.

Wise men – and women – still seek him. Do you?