*Epiphany 1B Matthew 2 1-12*

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

And so with this celebration of the Feast of the Ephiphany, we come once more to the very end of the Nativity play season. While I was never in later years an academic high-flyer, I was, at the age of five, a precocious reader, and therefore chosen as Narrator of the infant school Nativity from the moment I arrived until I moved up to Junior School three years later. I never got to wear the beautiful blue that dignified Mary, nor to don angel wings, a white robe and tinsel. I wore my own clothes and carried a gold-covered script. Bah Humbug to all that. I wanted wings and tinsel and to carry the baby Jesus.

And I wonder if the reason why these nativities resonate with so many of us is because we do remember our own experiences of taking part. Do stop me after the service and tell me which part you played….

We are thinking today particularly of the Magi, the wise men, but I think that all the parts played in nativities bear the same marks of the essential elements of Christian life:

First of all: we play these parts not solo, although we each have our moment in the limelight; we play them in the company of others. (That is why, incidentally, it is so important that we baptise children during our main Sunday services, and not, on the whole, outside them – because we all share in the Christian life that the newly baptised are starting out on, and we all play our parts in supporting others in that journey).

The journey that the wise men embarked on was like any journey of faith. It involved making mistakes, taking wrong turnings, needing to ask the way, yet somehow finding the way to the goal. It involved keeping going even when things got so tough that they really wanted to give up, turn round and go home again. Through foul weather or when it was dark and cloudy and they couldn’t see the star any more, or when they were just plain tired or bored with pressing ever onwards. Why, in those conditions and circumstances, did the Magi keep going? Part of the answer must be each other. Alone, they might have given up, but together, they shared responsibility for one another’s well-being, and when one was down, there were others to encourage him. (And just for the record, remember we don’t really know how many Magi there were – only that three gifts are named in the story that reached us). We are meant to journey together, to share both our joys and our sorrows. We do not travel alone.

Secondly: the kings brought gifts to the infant Jesus. Costly gifts and meaningful ones – every time we sing We 3 Kings, we tell the story behind those gifts: gold for kingship, frankincense expressing divinity, and myrrh for dying. And we sort of echo these when we offer our own gifts at the altar, Sunday by Sunday: all things come from you, and of your own do we give you. That which we receive from God as gift, we should rightly offer back to God.

The Feast of the Epiphany is a great opportunity for us to worship and to offer to God the gift of ourselves - all that we are and all that we have. Methodists often take the opportunity at this time of year to hold a Covenant Service. West Cornwall, where I served my curacy, is still very much a Methodist stronghold, and so it was a huge honour to be invited to take part in this service, reading and leading prayers, on a couple of occasions, and having the whole congregation of Wendron Church – we occupied Wendron Vicarage at the time – invited as well. I’ll come to the particular bit that never failed to move me in a moment or two.

And the third thing to glean from a look back at nativity plays is that the actors almost never fail to give themselves in adoration and mystery. You have only to see the faces of the children who come to the Crib Service here on Christmas Eve to know that.

The wise men had received a vision. That star took them on a mission - to drop everything and travel a vast distance in difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances, to take hardship and discomfort in order to reach something that they couldn’t really imagine. And in many ways, that is what Christians have been doing ever since. We, if anything, less so than they, because at least we have the documented stories of Christ’s life and Passion to lead the way – they had only the star. But we all put our trust in our spiritual intuition and live with this sense of mystery. That is what faith is.

I believe that people hunger for a sense of mystery, for something more than our usual diet of things scientifically known and understood.

A friend of mine told me only yesterday about his experience at church in Germany just after Christmas, when they went to visit his wife’s family: the priest retold the story of the feeding of the five thousand, in which the five thousand were hungry not for food but for time. One of our ongoing problems is not lack of food, but trying to squeeze all the ‘stuff’ into the time available. But when Jesus took his part in this retelling of the five thousand, they found they had time and to spare: remember the baskets of bread ad fish left over – these people found they had more and more time to be with one another. One way in which the gift of time is manifested is in having real space in time: space and time for reflection and conversation with others and with God, space and time to just be quiet, space and time to give to other people. Time is a gift that badly needs to be somehow made bigger.

And so maybe Epiphany is the time to reawaken our sense of adventure – to allow ourselves to be led away from the known and safe and into the unknowable – into a deeper experience of God. To be, like the wise men, the virgin Mary, the shepherds and all the other characters in nativity plays then and now, lost in wonder, love and praise.

And so as we journey on together, I come back to that Methodist covenant prayer:

I am no longer my own but yours.  
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,  
exalted for you, or brought low for you;  
let me be full, let me be empty,  
let me have all things, let me have nothing:  
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.  
And now, glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.  
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

**Amen to all of that.**