**Isaiah 60:1-6**

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.   
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.   
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.   
Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.   
A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**Ephesians 3:1-12**

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:   
“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
   are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
   who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today is the feast of the Epiphany, the coming of the kings, often seen as the last hurrah of Christmas. Although I’m guessing that by now most of us have put away the tinsel and are fully focused on the year ahead.

In any case, we know all about the kings, don’t we? They arrive in the last few minutes of the nativity play, bringing a bit of welcome bling to the scene with their shiny crowns and exotic presents, squeezing into the stable between a lamb and the smallest angel, just before a rousing chorus of “We wish you a merry Christmas”.

Except that if we look a little more closely at the story in the gospel reading today, that’s not quite what it tells us. First of all, the travellers may not have been royal at all. Matthew calls them wise men. A tradition grew up in the early church that they were kings, drawing on prophetic words from our first reading: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Nor does the bible say anywhere how many visitors there were, only that they brought three gifts. But the number three in Christian theology signifies diversity and completeness, as we see for example in the trinity. Three kings represent the peoples of the whole world in all their variety, in other words, all of us.

It’s possible that our picture of the crib scene might be misleading in other ways too. If we read on from where today’s gospel left off, we see that Herod – panicked at the thought of a challenge to his authority and acting on the wise men’s information – had his soldiers kill not just Bethlehem’s newborns, but all boys up to two years old. So perhaps by the time the wise men arrived to see Jesus, the shepherds and the manger were already a distant memory. Whatever the precise time-line, their visit almost brought catastrophe. Only a couple of well-timed dreams and a hasty escape across the border saved Jesus from the bloodbath.

So, the wise men arrived late, asked tactless questions of the wrong people, offered an array of age-inappropriate gifts, and beat a hasty retreat, leaving others to deal with the violent aftermath. (Does that sound familiar? I’m sure I’ve been to Christmas gatherings like that...)

As we’ve seen, their role in the story is more than just a bit of extra spice for the plot, though. Matthew identifies Jesus as the Messiah, destined to lead the people of Israel to greatness among the nations. But as today’s reading from Ephesians makes clear, these mysterious foreign visitors herald the dawning of a new relationship between God and the world. Through Jesus, “the gentiles have become fellow-heirs” of the promises of God. Instead of stamping down insurrection and oppressing his defeated enemies (in the manner of Herod), Jesus opens the door of his kingdom to all comers. There is no privileged country status in the kingdom of heaven.

I want to pick out two other elements from the wise men’s story that I think are significant. The first is that they found Jesus by following a star. The bible is generally pretty scathing about star-gazers. Daniel, that great hero of the old testament, showed the power of his God by being able to interpret the dreams of the king of Babylon, where all the king’s magicians and astrologers had failed. The prophet Isaiah calls astrologers “as useless as stubble burnt in the fire”. His attitude is not surprising given that the Babylonians, like other ancient civilizations, revered stars and planets as gods, which the Jewish law strictly forbids. So for the wise men to be led by a star would suggest to Matthew’s Jewish readers that they were following false gods and therefore their endeavours would come to nothing. And yet, they did find and recognise the Christ-child, unlike, it seems, most of his own people.

I think that says something profound about the way that God’s truth transcends our expectations. Religious institutions have a habit of trying to put boundaries around what is acceptable. In part, that is their job: they are there to protect time-honoured beliefs and proclaim them afresh in the face of passing fashions. But the bible is full of examples of God opening people’s eyes to a bigger picture, encouraging them to recognise that God is more than what they thought. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,” says Isaiah.

In today’s epistle, Paul speaks of “the wisdom of God in its rich variety,” and later refers to “my understanding of the mystery of Christ.” He saw that no single person can begin to comprehend the whole mystery of God. While the church is there to guide and advise us, receiving the fullness of life that God offers requires each of us to come to our own understanding of his promises.

Grappling with this same mystery of God born as a human baby, John’s gospel says: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” The light of understanding, inspiration and revelation is available to us all, but we each receive it individually, according to our unique perspective. The wise men came from a culture where stars provided guidance, and faithfully following that guidance they came to a revelation of a new kind of truth.

I’m not trying to suggest that it doesn’t matter what we put our trust in. Sadly there are still people in our world who believe their gods tell them to commit unspeakable atrocities. And the gospels warn us that pursuit of personal power, wealth and security are more likely to blind us to the truth than lead us to it. What I mean is that we should pay attention to those things that allow us to look up and see a purpose beyond ourselves. In this week of headlines about space exploration, looking to the stars has a rather different resonance for us, but perhaps the vision of those who seek to uncover the secrets of our universe can provide encouragement for our own lives.

I’m not advocating setting out on a quest (who has time for that?) but asking what spurs us on to live our lives more fully. It might be a desire for social justice, a drive for excellence in a skill or an organisation, a commitment to make a happy home or simply the willingness to share someone’s pain. Or something entirely else that only you know about. It’s not an accident that you are the person you are. Your talents, aptitudes and inspiration are precious to God. They may not lead you exactly where you expect, but the God who was born in a stable is found in the most unlikely places.

And one final thing about the wise men: they allowed themselves to be changed by their journey. Following the star they found their way to Jesus, bowed down to his authority, and were transformed from outsiders to citizens of his kingdom. At which point, their source of guidance changed too. Matthew tells us they went home by another road, having been warned in a dream. Dreams are one of the key ways the God of the bible communicates: think of Joseph in the old testament, or the flurry of dreams around Jesus’s birth. The wise men arrived by the light of their own traditions and left under the guidance of God, whose truth was revealed to them by their journey. If we are seeking what truly matters to us, we can expect that our understanding will be deepened but also redirected. What we find is unlikely to be what we thought we were looking for, because the boundless riches of Christ stretch further than any of us can imagine.

So my prayer for all of us today is that in this new year we may find courage to follow what inspires us in our own lives, discernment to recognise the things that matter, and a road that leads us ever further into the light and love of God.

Ruth Carter