

## Reflection for The Epiphany 2nd January 2022 by Rev Pauline Taylor

Perhaps those unknown strangers from Iraq or Afghanistan, crossing the dangerous crowded shipping lanes of the channel to reach Britain in small inflatable boats exhibit the resourcefulness and tenacity of the wise men of old in their ardent desire to make a difficult journey. Many migrants have come 'from the east': the entire European colonisation of the Americas, the Ugandan Asians who were expelled by Idi Amin in the 1970's, have brought new knowledge and wisdom. In every historical case the migrants have enriched the land to which they came.

I remember in 1972 we got a new pupil in the secondary school I attended in Accrington. She was very sad and angry that not all her family had been able to travel from Uganda to England with her. This was due to the terrible threats made by Idi Amin towards the Asians living there. Pavinda was happy in Uganda and it was her dream to become a doctor and return to Uganda and practice there. A lot of my fellow classmates did not make Pavinda welcome which I think was due to a lack of understanding that a President could be so cruel to its citizens. There was not the same media coverage as today that would have perhaps helped them to see and understand the situation. The choice of coming to England was not an easy decision and Pavinda missed her family and friends who remained in Uganda. Some of my classmates did not recognize the gifts that Pavinda and her family could bring to this country and like many today viewed them as a threat.

I was able to discover when I attended a school reunion and met Pavinda again that she had become a doctor in England and was planning to return to Uganda. She returned to Uganda sometime later in her early 40's thus realising her childhood dream.

As we have seen during the Covid pandemic and post Brexit, the need for migrants on whose skills and labour we rely have been plain to see. Whether this is for harvesting our food, bringing the new-born safely into the world, or tending the aged with dignity. We need, as the Christ child did, to welcome the rich gifts that strangers bring rather than following the example of Herod [and some of my classmates] who discerned only a threat.

It is hard to find a biblical story that has caught the imagination and stimulated so much research and reflection as the account of the wise men. Along with the crucifixion, it's the most depicted subject by artists, poets, sculptors and musicians. Yet the story of the wise men is recounted in just one of the four Gospels and covers a brief 12 verses. They function as our representatives; all of us Gentiles were not actually there. That is the connection that runs through today's three readings and forms the theme for today. It is the theme of God's great self-revelation to the world.

In Isaiah, the scene is in darkness when suddenly a light, shines that illuminates the central figure and emphasises the darkness all around. Others are attracted to the light and through the happy sounds the central character's voice is heard, singing a hymn. Gradually other voices pick it up until they all sing one song, a song of praise to the light. This is how Isaiah sees God's revelation and finishes with a picture of community united to 'proclaim the praise of the Lord'.

This is how Ephesians sees it, too. The point of God's epiphany is that everyone should be drawn to him. Huge claims are made for Paul – and by implication, for all Christians – in this reading. It is said that the 'mystery' of God's inclusive call waits upon Paul's conversion and commission.

*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,*

To Paul and it is rather grudgingly admitted, to `the holy apostles and prophets`, is entrusted the revelation that all can share in the gospel. But again, as with the reading in Isaiah, the purpose of this self-gift of God to his people is not to elevate believers above others, but to enable worship. We can now approach God, knowing that we are called, loved and wanted.

What strange messengers God chooses for his gospel – the dark mourning figure in Isaiah; the difficult, touchy apostle Paul, the infantile, squabbling Christian Church. Which brings us full circle to the wise men again. They are very odd figures, we don't know where they came from, how many there were and how many presents they brought. What they found cannot have been what they were expecting. They were tracking a king and used their expertise to follow a star.

The real story of the wise men seems to be about the challenge of God's coming. God's kingship is not what you might expect and his revelation is blindingly unpredictable. But at least the wise men do recognize their journey's end when they see it. We are told that they are `overwhelmed with joy` They leave their strange presents and go home satisfied. Let us hope that in that, at least, they are our representatives.

We too, will reach our destination if we have the courage to keep on seeking. If we persevere on the journey: we will find our questions answered and the confusion resolved as we glimpse for ourselves the wonder of God revealed in Christ.

Though not included in today's Gospel, Matthew's story remains incomplete without knowing the fate of the child whom the wise men had found. The holy family become homeless refugees escaping from persecution. And for today's refugees, even the perils of a winter crossing of the channel are preferable to a return home.

Finally, when we find travel to holiday destinations so easy, to the extent that even delays caused by imagined drones, inclement weather or industrial action seem unacceptable, have we forgotten how enterprising the wise men were, and how courageous those who travel out of desperation today?

**Let us Pray:**

Lord Jesus Christ, you have told us seek and we shall find. Yet that search is not always easy. As we look for meaning in our lives, there is so much that puzzles and perplexes. The more we discover, the more we realise how little we have understood. Give us the determination of the wise men to keep on looking, despite all that obscures us, until at last we find our perseverance rewarded and we glimpse your glory and kneel before you in joyful worship.

**Amen**