

Knowing the Way and the Main Task of the Journey – Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1–6; Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14; Ephesians 3:1–12; Matthew 2:1–12

PRAYER

A helicopter was flying around above Seattle recently when an electrical malfunction disabled all of the aircraft's electronic navigation and communications equipment.

Due to the clouds and haze, the pilot could not determine the helicopter's position and course to steer to the airport.

The pilot saw a tall building, flew towards it, circled, drew a handwritten sign, and held it in the helicopter's window. The pilot's sign said "WHERE AM I" in large letters.

People in the tall building quickly responded to the aircraft, drew a large sign, and held it in a building window. Their sign said "YOU ARE IN A HELICOPTER".

The pilot smiled, waved, looked at his map, determined the course to steer to SEATAC airport and landed safely.

After they were on the ground, the co-pilot asked the pilot how the "YOU ARE IN A HELICOPTER" sign helped to determine their position.

The pilot responded: "I knew that had to be the MICROSOFT building because, similar to their help lines, they gave me a technically correct but completely useless answer."

This joke points us to questions of: "How do we know the way to our particular destination?" and "Why this particular journey"?

These are our New Year questions.

For the Magi – how did they know the way? – The way was provided by the star – ie a sun, a source of light. The way was also helped by their study, their research, enabling them to watch for and expect the star, then later by the research of the chief priests and teachers in Herod's court, helping them get back on track when they lost their guiding light. It was the knowledge in the Scriptures that helped them get back on track when they got lost. Note that it took some determination to start, continue and finish their journey.

Why? Why did they take this particular journey?

To worship!

V 2 *"We saw the star in the east and have come to worship him".*

Now the words used here for worship in the Greek is "proskunhsai autw." autw = him. proskunhsai is a compound of 'prov' meaning 'to' and kuwn which actually is used for a dog but signifying 'to crouch and fawn like a dog at his master' feet'. It means to prostrate oneself to another according to the eastern custom – in this the person kneels and puts his/her head between their knees, while at the same time his/her forehead touches the ground. This word was used to express both civil and religious reverence. It is a way of paying homage.

The visit of the Magi – oh and by the way nowhere in the Scriptures does it say there are 3 of them. There are 3 gifts but there is no number for the Magi. Now the Magi's visit has Herod's interest and distress stirred up and he asks them to tell him the way when they find it so that he too can go and 'worship' the child.

In the question how do we know the way? Herod heard from two learned sources the way to the Messiah, the Magi and the religious leaders in his court, but yet he is happy to have the way told to him by those who go there first rather than responding to the original sources. And he relies on his own cunning hypocrisy – which fails him this time.

He also proclaimed the "Why" he wished to know the way. Herod says it is to worship – but God knows his heart and all hearts and the Magi are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.

So two lots of people wanting to find the way to the Christ Child.

- One using the star – a source of light.
- The other relying on a cunning plan.

One succeeds, one fails but has a horrible tantrum later.

Both claim the same reason for the trip – to worship – whether that be in the civil, religious sense or both.

One is true worship. One is false worship.

When I think of the Magi following the star, and we know stars are really suns, a source of light and I think of the Isaiah reading – "Arise shine, the light has come". I love the way it all fits together for Jesus is the light of the world. He lights our path and His Word is a lamp to our feet.

But keeping to our theme of wanting to know the way to go and why take the journey.

I want to move us to thinking about that being the starting point for where we go as a church this year.

Our vision as a church is: walking together with Jesus to bring his life to the world.

I add the words for us this year which I think are implicit in the vision statement anyway **WALKING TOGETHER IN THE SAME DIRECTION WITH JESUS TO TAKE HIS LIFE AND LOVE TO THE WORLD.**

This doesn't mean doing all the same thing but what we do as a church is going in the same direction together.

And our purpose?

Our purpose is to worship!!!

Worship is a whole of life attitude and response to God. It is a paying homage to Jesus Christ moment-by-moment, step-by-step. It is offering Jesus our gold, our frankincense and our myrrh.

The gold is what we offer to our King. May everything we offer to Jesus this year be refined, pure, holy and worthy of Him. Every prayer, every song, every reflection on the Scriptures, every word, every action, every deed be done for Jesus. Knowing that what we do for others in Jesus' name, we do for, and to, Jesus. This is the gold we offer, but it must be refined, have pure motives.

The frankincense is about His Divinity. Frankincense was usually burnt on charcoal and could be combined with other spices and seeds. Incense has been used from time immemorial as an offering to the gods. That is why incense is burnt. As worshippers of God incense is offered to our God. He is God Almighty. He is Creator. We can offer incense differently to other religions. Our prayers rise as incense. In the Book of Revelation the prayers of the saints are spoken about as incense. Rev 5: 8 "*each (24 elders) had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*". Our prayers are so valuable to God that they are collected in heaven and placed in golden bowls. Never undervalue your prayers. They are precious to God. They are an 'incense offering' to God. Let us offer prayers that are worthy of our Divine King.

Myrrh like Frankincense is dried sap of a tree. It was used in embalming in Egyptian times and for medicinal purposes and was as valuable a gold, and on occasions more valuable. Myrrh reveals how united Jesus was and is to us through His suffering and death. May we die to self and our desires and be crucified with Him, Jesus, and be united with Him as He has become with us. Myrrh is a gift offering to Jesus when we die to self and be born again with Jesus – daily as well as a first choice.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh: These are gifts we can offer to Jesus as our daily worship of Him on our journey together this year.

- For worship will be paramount this year; and
- Creating more opportunities for our corporate worship; and
- Creating more opportunities for reaching out to non-churchgoers to worship in a way that is not too unfamiliar, yet is true worship.

Remember these things: worship is our main focus; more opportunities of worshipping together; and creating experiences of worship for non-churchgoers.

And Paul gives us some reasons for this ‘Why’ part of our journey for this year in verses 8-9 of Ephesians 3.

“Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”

Paul’s life’s mission, once he was aware that he shared in the Promises of God, was to make known to everyone the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s mission becomes our mission. Our ‘why’ for our journey really. So like Paul we will seek to make plain the Gospel of Christ, the riches of Christ to those around us and this is spelt out more as a task for the church in v 10-11. I love this one. *“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Church we have a job to do – according to God’s eternal purposes. These purposes have been accomplished in Christ and we have all we need to partner with Him in making it plain to the generation we live in. v 12 *“In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”*.

In Christ and through faith in Christ we can be confident of accomplishing all He has in store for us this year.

But more importantly let us be aware of the privilege that comes with these words. In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God – with freedom and confidence.

Remember the Magi came from afar to worship and brought gifts.

No one approaches a king freely unless one is from the king's own family or has special privileges.

How do we approach our King?

1. Firstly in and through Christ. It has to be in that special way.
2. We also come through the Blood of Jesus, cleansing us from all sin. Hebrews 10:19 *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ..."*

We are on holy ground when we approach our God.

Why do we approach our King, our God?

To worship Him first and foremost.

And our worship needs to be a true desire – not a false or pretend desire.

If we don't have it let us ask for the desire to worship God well.

This is our main aim for this year to come – to worship our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as He deserves.

It is written in stone at the front doors of the Charnwood church – it is the main purpose of this church. Our mission, our outreach to the community flows from this first thing, this act of love to God.

So how do we do it well?

1. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us worship in Spirit and in truth.
2. We come like the Magi "proskunhsai autw" – offering our gold, frankincense and myrrh.
3. Looking for more opportunities to worship corporately. And more opportunities to make the Good News of Jesus plain to our generation.
4. We offer our daily moments as worship, every thought, every action, every word to Jesus.
5. And we seek Him first and His righteousness trusting that all other things will be looked after by Him.

And

6. We walk together in the same direction seeking to know the desires of His heart. And we can be confident that the desires of His heart will be perfect for our way ahead. And we can be confident that He will provide all we need for the journey.

And the journey will be also a corporate act of worship!

Let us pray:

Dear Lord in Isa 30 you say our ears will hear a voice saying this is the way walk in it. We confidently state that Jesus is the way and we confidently offer to you to walk with You Jesus together the way you have for us this year. We pray that it will be our spiritual worship of you as we offer to you our gold, our frankincense and our myrrh.

Let us silently offer to Jesus our own gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for Him particularly for this year.

Finish with Hymn *Trust and Obey*