

Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 3rd January
2021**

2nd Sunday of Christmas



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

A new year has begun.

Let us leave behind all that is past, and walk together into the future.

Let us trust in the God of new beginnings, and worship the God of fresh hopes.

Lord of our journeys, help us this day to have eyes to see your leading, ears to hear your guidance, and a heart of courage, that we may journey faithfully and find your way – even when the path may seem difficult and dark.

Glorious Lord, we your sons and daughters come together into your kingly presence.

We lift our eyes to you, seeking your guiding light and offering up our gifts of worship and praise.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 60 v1-6 (p746) The Glory of Zion

Psalms 72 v1-7, 10-14 (p585) All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.

Ephesians 3 v1-12 (p1174) Paul the Preacher to the Gentiles

Matthew 2 v1-12 (p966) The Visit of the Magi

Go and Search

This week our focus is on where to look for the direction God has for our lives.

The account of the wise men involves searching – initially by looking in the wrong place – for the newborn king. They eventually find him by following the star to Bethlehem. God's guidance in a dream warns them to take a different route home.

From the Old Testament, this section of Isaiah was composed after the people returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild their lives in Israel. Though they were back home, much had changed. Their faith had come to the attention of the wider world, and those who were not Jews had begun to realise the power and attraction of Israel's God – like a flame of light in the darkness. How were God's people to respond to these outsiders? Some said they should be rejected, while others – such as Isaiah – argued that they should be made welcome.

For Isaiah, their arrival is a proof of God's power to draw people close. For centuries, the Israelites had paid tribute to more powerful nations, but now the flow is reversed, and economic resources are imagined flowing into Israel as markers of the foreigners' desire to glorify God. Israel's wealth exists to honour God, not to enrich the people. In the same way, the wise men's gifts were given to honour Jesus.

What qualities make for a good king? The psalmist is clear that good leadership is defined by justice and righteousness, and shaped by a passion to see the oppressed set free and treated fairly. The poem uses powerful imagery to highlight the beauty of the good king's reign – he

is like life-giving rain showers. His policies deserve to succeed, enabling the people to flourish and prosper because of his justice.

Paul was passionately committed to God's purpose of drawing the Gentiles into the family of God's people. This was his special task. Although for many other Christians this was controversial, Paul argued fiercely for the inclusion of Gentiles as equal partners in the Gospel. For him, the presence of the Gentiles was the key sign of God's free grace revealed in Christ. Their faith proved that belief in Jesus as Lord was enough in itself. No other practices made any difference: circumcision, or fasting, or keeping special days as festivals – all were completely unnecessary. For Paul, the 'boundless riches of Christ', as described here in the passage from Ephesians, are God's gracious gift to us, independent of anything we might do.

This faith was shared freely with the Gentiles. The Gospel reading speaks of the gifts the Gentiles brought to Jesus, but this passage points the other way, to God's far greater gift to the Gentiles, Jesus himself. Now, they are 'fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus'.

Now, who were the magi? Herod clearly has little respect for their social status – he orders them off to Bethlehem like servants. The NRSV translates the Greek word as 'wise men', but a number of ancient writers are more doubtful. The knowledge of the magi came from their familiarity with the stars, and could spill over into a deeply suspect occultism.

Matthew's magi create a mixed impression. They have the insight to recognise that this star portends events that are worth exploring; but then, near the end of their journey, they choose to ignore the star and go where their common sense directs them – they assume that a king will be found in a palace. Their mistaken arrival terrifies Herod and has appalling consequences for the families of Bethlehem – the so-called 'holy innocents' (see 2 v16-18). This deepens our questions about Jesus. Who is this child, who can terrify King Herod himself? The quotation from Micah (v6/Micah 5 v2,4) implicitly contrasts the gentle

leadership of a shepherd with a tyrant's terror, and suggests how far Herod has gone wrong.

Their journey gets back on track when the magi follow the advice of Herod, of all people, and 'go and search' for the child. The theme of searching and finding recurs in Matthew's Gospel. 'Search, and you will find,' says Jesus (7 v7-8), and he tells parables about a merchant searching for fine pearls (13 v45) and a shepherd searching for a lost sheep (18 v12). Matthew encourages us to take the initiative in actively looking for God's presence, and promises that such initiative will bring joy.

This searching yields results for the magi, but the journey's end is unexpected. They find a little child, the word emphasising his vulnerability to tyrants such as Herod and his marginal status in a power-hungry society. This is underlined by the sharp contrast between the little boy with his mother and the rich gifts the visitors offer. Yet the joy of the magi suggests that they found what they were looking for.

Looking for the direction God has for us is not always as easy as following a star or hearing from God in a dream. When/how have you experienced God guiding you or helping you to make decisions? Particularly at the start of a new year and a new term, we may all be called to reflect on where best we can look for and recognise signs from God that offer us guidance.

A Sending Out Prayer

Lord, as we continue our journey with you this week,
as we seek to live out our faith every day,
be with us, surprise with your love,
nudge us when you want us
to see or do something new –
for Jesus' sake.

Amen.