

Led by....a star

Sermon Message for Epiphany by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saints' Belmont 2019

Keynote Bible Passage: Matthew 2.1- 12, (Isaiah 60.1 - 6)

As we cast our minds back over the Christmas story as recorded in the Gospels, have you noticed how frequently dreams were used by God to guide people on their journey? For example, in today's Gospel passage the Wise Men are warned in a dream not to return to King Herod after visiting the child Jesus. Then also, dreams were given to Joseph, to marry Mary, and to flee to Egypt, thence to return to Nazareth to live after the end of the persecution. As we look closely in the passage, there's other ways also whereby God leads. For example, there is reference to Scripture for the Wise Men to know where to find the child Jesus, as the prophecy of Micah comes to mind. And the reference to Isaiah 60 would seem to point to the appropriateness of bringing gold and frankincense. Nor can we overlook the star, very much regarded as a sign from heaven, no less. But this 'sign' brings us into a grey area for Christians. Whilst we may not like to acknowledge it, the correct (Greek) term for the visitors to the child was of magi. It doesn't take too much to this word has the same root as 'magic.' The fact is we're told the magi were astrologers, and thus they would have been familiar with the signs of the Zodiac, an integral part of horoscopes and future-telling. Astrology wasn't new, it had been in the east from at least the 6th century BC. Indeed, in those early days astrology and astronomy rather overlapped. So, it could have been that a significant conjunction of planets occurred about that time. This led the magi to both recognise a king, and to follow the star first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. It needs be said, this in no way justifies use of such occult by Christians in these days.

Indeed, it's to the '*being led by....*' that I particularly seek to focus, on this observance of Epiphany, and indeed to mark the new year of 2019. This we see especially in this event in the birth narrative of Jesus. First the magi are led by a star. Then after arriving at the house (note no longer a manger) they worship the child Jesus. Unsurprisingly Matthew tells us they experienced great joy.

Then they are guided by a dream not to return to Herod with news of their discovery.

First then may I link the journey motif with a 'plan.' That's certainly what the planners for Epiphany readings considered. As St Paul reflected on the coming of Christ, he saw in it '*a plan for the fullness of time.*' Thus, writing to the Ephesians: 'All things are done in accordance with God's plan and decision.' (1-4 -11) An aspect of this plan is that Christians were 'destined for adoption' as children through Jesus Christ. This according to the good pleasure of God's will'. That's what unfolds in the first Chapter of the letter to the Christians at Ephesus. Thus, we can regard the events of Christmas as being a particular unfolding of God's plan for humanity. An angel with a message for Mary, a birth in Bethlehem, shepherds and angels, and wise men, all God's plan in the 'eternal purpose.' Indeed, as St Paul writes of its relevance he writes believing 'you were chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.' We humans have opportunity to be part of this plan unfolding. As we take account of the Biblical Scriptures and especially Jesus' life and example, for us there is choice, we might describe as 'a lifestyle choice.' I'm reminded of a song of a few years back with the words: 'It's my plan to fit into your plan.' So then how do we know the plan? And how might we be guided in it? That's where the 'being led' comes into play. I regard it as 'divine call, human response.' That

is, by being in relationship with Jesus, we enable the plan to unfold. A particular insight in the same letter seems to me to say how it is: 'We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.' (Ephesians 2.10).

Now we come to *the 'how'* are we led. First may I refer to *dreams*. It seems surprising to me that in these days there's so little focus on the significance of dreams. Especially considering the part they played as earlier mentioned, and indeed for other people of God in Scripture. Perhaps you do have dreams but don't take into account what they might be telling. Most readily I know from my own that they tell me about what are my anxieties, what's going on in my mind in my unconscious. The ones I most consider are from God are those with recurring motifs. What do you make of your dreams? It may well be to take note of what they are telling you, or giving insight into your life.

A second way that I am aware of God's leading is *through another person*, though it needs be said, not in being given advice. Rather, as they speak, I *know* inwardly it is the Holy Spirit speaking through them. This could be through a Sermon, or in person to person conversation. It seems 'right.' For others there's *words from Scripture* that 'come alive' in speaking to a person's situation. Some have described to me hearing an *audible voice*, though not knowing where it came from.

Another, which would seem to have relationship with a possible conjunction of stars is to note a *concurrence of events*, a kind of 'going with the flow,' or things unfolding. Another way is through 'eyes being opened' to see and be given insight unexpectedly. The writer to the Hebrews began with testifying 'In many and various ways God spoke.....' and especially through Jesus God's Son.

In summary then, there's numbers of ways God can use to guide us on the journey. It may be important however to seek a 'confirmation' of what you believe is Divine guidance. That's not lack of faith, rather to use human reasoning and logic, or check it out with someone, give it some thought before making decisions. One more consideration may be helpful: I've found that God is pretty much consistent in how we are guided. As we look back on ways God has guided, has been there in the past, we can trust it could well be in the present and into the future. As one reads verses of scripture or devotional passages, especially regularly they may 'come alive' in a message. Or through words of a sermon, a hymn or song, or reflections from Christian writers or speakers on the internet. Thus, it is true 'the word of God is alive and active' (Hebrews 4.12)

What *is* important overall, is to realise that we you/I am part of God's plan unfolding, we can *expect* guidance to happen. My concern is in this day and age in the busyness, we can miss the guidance being offered. So, what could be a helpful New Year resolution is to consciously take times of quiet, of being, awareness of God's presence in the still small voice, and a balance for the busyness. Thus, we will realise that the experience of those people of God in Scripture is not too unlike our own. The invitation, indeed possibility, is for each of us to be open to the further unfolding of God's eternal purpose, God's plan. I close in this context to pray for all that this may indeed be a fulfilling New Year.