



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Epiphany

Readings: **Isaiah 60.1-6, Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12** 5 January 2025

I wonder how many of you take time to stargaze?

Sadly, the effect of light pollution in our urban areas means that many of us are unfamiliar with the great sense of awe and wonder that the night sky can trigger. I think we're spiritually poorer for it, too, because at one level, we are deeply connected to the stars.

Carl Sagan, the popular American astronomer, used to say that 'we are made of star stuff', that 'the cosmos is within us'. And there is a truth about that because nearly all of the elements in the human body were made in a star, and many have come through what are known as supernovas.

With this background in view, I was, then, very interested to learn that one of the researchers in the psychology department at the University, Dr. Chris Barnes, has been doing some work about the relationship between ourselves and the night sky. And more particularly, how it can impact upon our mental health and wellbeing.

I started to engage with him on the subject and out of that, the two of us decided to run a little one-off event during the last semester. On a clear cold night in November, when the planet Saturn was visible in the sky, Chris set up his powerful telescope outside the main University entrance, whilst I took on the task of inviting homeward bound students to come and look through it and talk about the experience.

Over the course of an hour, about 20 or so students took the few moments required to gaze at Saturn and its rings, and as they did so, realized that they were seeing something that was just under 800 million miles from the earth.

A sense of wonder started to overtake them, even awe at what they were experiencing; in many ways a profoundly primal reaction given our deep, [albeit](#) usually unacknowledged, connection with the stars.

Of course, in our own Judeo Christian tradition, the stars play a significant role. God promises to Abraham that his descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky, whilst the Psalmist uses the stars to inspire us in the praise of our Creator: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, that you have established. What are human beings that you are mindful of them: mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8) yet also going on to acknowledge that we are adorned with glory and honour being only a little lower than the angels.

And so to today's Gospel in which a particular star plays a significant role. A star of wonder, no less, as that familiar seasonal hymn describes it. We're celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany, and so we've just heard Matthew's account of the adventure of the Magi, the Wise men or Kings, as they're variously described. Those characters from the east who studied the night sky and found themselves captivated by a particular star, such that they were prompted to set off on a journey. And quite a journey it proved to be.

Some scholars think they came from Persia, today's Iran, making for a travel distance of around 1,000 miles – not a straightforward trek, especially on the back of a camel, as anyone who has ever ridden only a short distance on such a creature will testify.

It's a journey that has been captured by artists and writers over the years, and one in particular was the poet W.H Auden. There's a lovely little book called 'What W.H Auden can do for you'; and one of the things I think Auden does is to take us deeper into today's Gospel.

Set within his very long poem entitled *For the Time Being: A Christmas oratorio*, a work completed in July 1942, Auden offers a perspective on the journey through the eyes the Magi. The poem reads:

*At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star.*

It's just a few lines but they pack a punch, for it's clear that Auden is using them to articulate not only a world-weariness and dissatisfaction that we can all feel at times, but also and profoundly, a yearning and desire within us for meaning. In Auden's eyes, in spite of all their despondency, the star is somehow able to capture the imagination of Magi, inspiring them to carry on travelling, because they are longing for a real humanity.

And we discover in today's Gospel, their journey reaches its culmination point as the star stops over the place where the child lay. The star, which had evoked wonder in them, had led them to the very cause of its appearing. It had drawn them to the baby in a manger, it had drawn them to Emmanuel, God with us.

And here in this scene, the Gospel writer Matthew is wanting to tell us various things. In part, he is saying that here, we find God's promise to Abraham fulfilled in the child who is for more than his own people, witnessed to by those seekers of wisdom from beyond the Judaic tradition. Here is the child who is for everyone, thus making Abraham's descendants as many as the stars in the sky.

But there is something else happening too. Matthew also tells us that when the travellers saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy, and on entering the place, they knelt down and worshipped the Christ child.

Our celebration today, often referred to as the Adoration of the Magi, tells us something about how our capacity to worship is vital to the joy of being human. To be fully human is to allow ourselves to be caught up in the divine mystery that is unfolding. If you like, to permit ourselves to shiver with awe as we feel some sense that the one who gives us our very being, our Creator, has drawn close to us, is in the midst of us, inviting us on an extraordinary journey of transformation.

A Christmas blessing at this time uses the phrase – 'Christ, who by his incarnation, gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, make you partakers of the divine nature'; and likewise, one of the Collects for this season asks that 'as Christ came to share in our humanity, so may we share the

life of his divinity'. No wonder then, that the Magi rejoiced. They'd glimpsed what it is to be truly human.

To finish, let's return to Auden. In his poem "September 1, 1939", written at a time when the world was facing a threat to civilisation as dangerous as any we face now, he asserted that we, though dust, can be caught up in the divine light, which darkness can never comprehend.

So as we travel through this Christmas and Epiphany season and beyond, may we allow ourselves to be so caught up in such a way that God raises us to a new dignity, in which earth and heaven unite, enabling light to shine forth from within us and sparkle, just like the stardust of which we are made!

The Revd Adam Dickens, Cathedral and University Chaplain