

Epiphany at St David's Exeter, 08.01.16

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12 and Matthew 2:1-12

I wonder, when the Wise Men set out on their epic journey from wherever it was they came – scholars have suggested probably Persia in modern-day Iran, or Sheba in modern-day Yemen. I wonder, when they headed out, whether they really knew where it was they were going to end up.

From their words to King Herod, it seems that they knew they were looking for a child, and a child said to have been born “King of the Jews.” So they are looking for a King. But, I wonder, did they really expect to find this King in a humble house, rather than a palace? Did they really expect to find him with the young Mary and the carpenter Joseph, rather than a royal family?

Probably not. Probably the wise men didn't really know where it was they were going to end up.

I don't know much about the astrology that these men practiced, but it seems to me that you've got to be taking a bit of a risk to undertake a journey of that length, just on the strength of one star in the sky.

The wise men didn't really know where they were going to end up.

So, at the start of a new year with all the new things that it brings. And at the start of a new era in the life of this Church... do we really know where we are going to end up?

My parents always give me a new calendar for Christmas. Last week, I dutifully put it up, and filled it in with all the birthdays and anniversaries. There were also a few events and appointments and things to remember, mostly for January and February. But – I reflected - much of my calendar is still blank. I wonder if you calendars at home

look similar this time of year? And I wonder what scribbles and scrawls will have appeared on them by December? What celebrations we will be invited to. What 'congratulations' cards we will prompt ourselves to send to friends and families. Which weddings and funerals might populate our 2017 calendars. And what about the year in the life of this Church, St David's – what events and celebrations lie in store for this community in this place?

Where are we going to end up? The truth is, we don't really know what this year will bring.

I don't know how many of you watch the Queen's speech on Christmas day? It's a family tradition in my house, as everyone is called to be quiet, at least for a few minutes. Last year, there was a documentary on TV about these royal broadcasts, and I was particularly struck by the story of King George 6th broadcast in December 1939. At 3 o'clock on Christmas day, the King came on the radio to give a 9-minute speech to a nation at war and facing a scary and uncertain future. The speech became famous for its ending, the King's quotation of some verses by a little-known poet called Minnie Haskins. They go like this -

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."

I really do like those verses. That sense that the hand of God is far better even than a physical light when we step into the darkness of the unknown.

One of the real joys of my role as Vocations Officer for the Diocese of Exeter is meeting with people who are discerning something of where God might be leading them. Some of them have an inkling that a particular ministry is for them – Ordination, or Readership, youth work, or pastoral visiting, or a hundred other options. But there is rarely ever complete certainty. Discerning God’s call on their lives requires them to take a deep breath, put their hand into God’s and step out into the unknown, being guided by God wherever He might lead them, sometimes ending up in the ministry they anticipated, sometimes ending up somewhere completely unexpected.

John Pritchard describes the discernment process for Christian ministry as “setting a course for God, and continuing on that course wherever it may lead.”

And we don’t have to be discerning a Christian ministry to take that approach to life. We can all set a course for God, we can all walk with him into the unknown, trusting in him, wherever He may lead us.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,” reads Isaiah.

Christ, our light. Christ, whose light may lead us, whoever we are, and wherever we are going.

As we head into the unknown of 2017, maybe we will be faced with the unexpected. And that could be joys or sorrows, opportunities or challenges. And the faith and perseverance of those Wise Men may be a reminder to us that if we keep the light of Christ in our sights, if we put our hand into the hand of God, then surely we may be led safely through.

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."

Amen.