

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : Epiphany  
Sunday 8th January 2023

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**EPIPHANY 2023**

'A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey: The ways deep and the weather sharp, The very dead of winter.' So begins the famous poem by TS Eliot 'Journey of the Magi'. If, as some speculate, they travelled the 800 miles from Persia, it would have taken them some months – but in truth we don't know and it probably doesn't matter. The main point is that they travelled on tirelessly and without giving up in order to worship the Christ-child – but all the time guided on their journey by God.

And that theme of travelling, of pilgrimage, has continued as one of the strongest concepts for Christians from then on. We often speak of our own pilgrim journey as Christians. For many of us, our Christian faith was first kindled when we were brought to Church by our parents and godparents to be baptised. They may have continued to bring us along until we were able to come on our own – or there could well have been a gap until we began to discover, to uncover, faith for ourselves. Most of us are still discovering our faith on our pilgrim journey, a journey that we make alongside others. In Church our worship is not a static thing, for we travel to come together and we walk up to the altar to receive Communion, not as strangers but as pilgrims and friends together.

And that word 'together' is important. We are not Christians in isolation. We are privileged to walk our pilgrim way with others. Of course, it is all too easy for any group of people to become out of step, out of synch, with one another. The wise men would have had to agree about much on their journey – not least that they were indeed travelling in the right direction as the star led

them. A church congregation in today's world also needs to be very aware of that too.

I discovered that very early on here. I first set foot into this church on Advent Sunday 2016. I had applied for the post of Vicar of Christ Church and wanted to get a feel of the church and congregation for myself. So, quite anonymously and incognito, I came to a special evening service and sat behind a pillar. No-one knew who I was or why I was there. When the service started there was a lovely Advent hymn for the procession of the choir. I'm not sure which one it was – all I can vividly recall is that the words which the choir were singing were not the same words that the congregation had in their orders of service! I vowed then that if I was appointed as Vicar everyone had to sing from the same hymn book!

And that has been an important element of what we have been able to do together over these past 5½ years. Woe betides the Vicar who is a dictator.

It has always seemed crucially important to me for a congregation to be able to work and witness and worship together in stability and harmony – to sing together from the same hymn book. My hope and prayer is that you will continue to do just that in the period of vacancy and, let's face it, of uncertainty. But we can hold onto the words of Mother Julian of Norwich – 'all shall be well'.

The TS Eliot poem concludes: "A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly. But we continued and arrived at evening, not a moment too soon finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory". As you and I begin a new stage in our pilgrim journeys, we hope and pray that the outcome will be more than "satisfactory".

My Christian pilgrimage began on 18 September 1954 when I was baptised at St Saviour's Church, Westcliff-on-sea, Southend. Much later it then moved via Christ's Hospital and King's College London onto ordination in the Diocese of Hereford and then to a varied parish ministry in Shropshire, Stevenage, Epsom Downs, Milton Keynes, Potters Bar and finally to West Wimbledon; and I am sure it will continue in some form in the years ahead in Norwich.

Over all these past years I value the God-given words of Dag Hammarskjöld. He was the United Nations Secretary-General from 1953 until his death in a plane crash in 1961. As an aside, I would suggest that one of the fundamental aims of

the United Nations must be the importance of everyone singing from the same hymn book! Hammarskjold wrote these words which I came across recently and which speak to me. He said *“Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only they who keep their eye fixed on the far horizon will find their right road”*.

These are such highly appropriate words both for the wise men as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany and for us all to ponder this morning. And as I take my leave of the stage, I finish with words from that same man who penned this well-known saying:

*For all that has been – thank you. For all that is to come – yes.*

May God bless us and guide us all on our pilgrimage together in the words of today’s final hymn written by Sydney Carter, a pupil at my old school: *‘And it’s from the old I travel to the new, keep me travelling along with you’*. Amen.