

Look to the stars!

Isaiah 60.1-6

Ephesians 3.1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

“Arise, shine... lift up your eyes and look around,” says Isaiah. His words encourage our spirits to take wing, to dive into greater depths, to scale greater heights, to seek after more.

There are moments in our daily existence when our spirit compels us to step outside our usual frames of reference. For those who live in a city whose motto is “Between Downs and Sea We Flourish” we are spoilt for choice. Our spirits can be refreshed by the spray of sea salt on our faces as we look out to the horizon. Or we might soar upwards with buzzards and larks ascending above the South Downs. Or we might go out at night and behold the twinkling stars.

The capacity of the stars to lift our spirits and draw us into the mystery of reality is attested throughout history. Though it seems impossible to imagine living 16,500 years ago, there is something deeply recognisable in how our ancestors went into caves in places like Lascaux in France and painted star clusters like the Pleiades on the walls amid vivid images of bulls, birds and other creatures. Beyond these prehistoric stargazers, the stars form the basis of zodiac systems and cosmologies from across cultures. They have been understood as gods, heavenly bodies and angels impacting the

fates of human beings. Poets celebrate their celestial marvel; philosophers are inspired by them. The stars have encouraged scientific exploration into the origins of the universe, Einstein's theories of relativity, and Hawking's black holes. Science says we are made of stardust. Stars have spurred great nations to send people into space. Just last Thursday, China landed a spacecraft on the dark side of the moon for the first time in history. A few days before, Nasa's New Horizons spacecraft sent back images from the most distant object ever examined at the edge of our solar system. Popular culture is replete with stories of intergalactic adventure in Star Wars and Star Trek. Looking to the stars is synonymous with the quintessential human search for wisdom, adventure, and wonder.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, the church recalls us to this quest. We are invited to look around and encounter the world with the same eyes that scan the heavens for deeper wisdom. We are reminded that God's epiphany works *with* the grain of creation and our spirit's yearning – as their source, sustaining energy, health and end.

Epiphany asks us to follow in the steps of the wise men who look to one particular star over Jerusalem as a sign of a new hope. Whether they were philosophers, priests, astronomers or kings, these men from the East stand for every human seeker after wisdom. They bear witness to how God's epiphany works both in the mysteries of

creation and different cultures, pointing to something greater that speaks to human longing.

Their search leads the wise men to ask for help from the rulers and religious figures in Jerusalem. Here, as so often with institutions tasked with safeguarding wisdom, the guiding star drops out of sight. The reference to Herod's manipulative ways warns how this quest for wisdom can be a threat to power structures and co-opted by them. Religion, astrology, philosophy have all been used to control human beings. Scientific discoveries too have unleashed human destructive capacities. The race to explore space is often a mouthpiece for geopolitics. Even fictional stories about “galaxies far far away” and missions “to boldly go where no-one has gone before” serve huge commercial interests.

Yet despite themselves, the political and religious institutions do serve their purpose and point the way. The wise men, in their wisdom, are discerning and find help. The whispers of God's epiphany that they hear in creation are deepened by the words of scripture. Like any genuine encounter with the word of God, we can imagine the wise men's delight, trepidation and anticipation as they hear how their search is affirmed in the biblical text and given new direction.

Leaving Jerusalem they see the star afresh. The light of creation shines brighter in the light of scripture. Their joint radiance

converges in an encounter full of overwhelming joy; that joy which is the fruit of reaching your goal and finding it exceed your expectations. At the sight of Jesus and his mother this joy turns to reverence. By this act these wanderers from afar display a profound recognition of how wisdom's quest and God's epiphany meet in worship. Their response foreshadows our Eucharistic worship as they offer Christ gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These symbols of wealth, royal power, divinity are handed over, together with the search for wisdom, and transformed by God's epiphany in the Christ child. A new vision of reality breaks in. The wise men are profoundly changed. They go home by another road. They avoid power structures. They no longer follow a mere star.

Because of God's incarnation as Christ, all of creation, all human power structures, religion, philosophy, science and culture are reordered and subjected to Christ. As the early church put it, astrology came to an end; the stars trace an orbit around Christ who now determines their direction.¹ Christ holds the cosmos and judges it and all our endeavours. He judges them to be not divine. In doing so he sets them free to serve their proper purpose, not to be systems of control, but to build up what is beautiful, good and true in human community.

¹ For the keen-eyed among us, we can see this depicted in one of the stained glass windows in our Spirit Chapel where Christ's cloak contains the stars; in fact, in a 16,500 year echo, it encompasses the seven stars of the Pleiades!

This is a crucial reminder to us, who cannot engage with Epiphany simply as the wise men did. We stand on the other side of the encounter, as members of Christ's body. As St Paul says, we are to make others 'see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things....'"

Epiphany charges us with a vital commission, born at Christmas. We must champion the search for wisdom as belonging to all people. We must not fear powers beyond our control, for Christ has overcome them. We must fight against all that maims what is fully human in our society. We must be like stars at night that sing of God and human life in a way that resonates with people's spirits. We must be a people ready to welcome, with gratitude, the joy of others. We must be faithful custodians of such joy in our worship, and our engagement with scripture and the world around us. We must be vigilant in celebrating the gifts people share with us, not least the gift of themselves. We must be brave enough to stand under judgement and be transformed in the light of God's purpose. Finally, we must be generous witnesses to how God's epiphany breaks out of human-made confines, sets the spirit soaring, and liberates people to apply the insights of Christ's wisdom in their own contexts, homes and lives. In this way, God's Epiphany in Christ will shine in us and we shall "proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Isaiah)

Amen.