

Today, we celebrate the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem, marking their act of determination and perseverance in getting to see Jesus. But think of the disappointment these men must have experienced! For they had travelled through the night many miles by camel following a star, to discover that the star had come to rest over a stable. They had followed a star and found a stable. Surely they were expecting a palace? Or perhaps a stately mansion? Think how they must have felt. Their vast disappointment as they look down from some nearby Judean hill with the dawning realization that their destination was a stable!

Following stars and finding stables is a common occurrence in human experience. Who among us has not, at some time in our lives, fixed our gaze on some high and lofty star only to find it leads to a stable?

Hundreds of examples could be given. A young woman graduates from university full of great dreams, ambition, and expectation about the future, only to wake up one day and discover herself enmeshed in the very drudgery that she had promised herself she would avoid.

Or a man who comes to the age of retirement: he thinks of all the good things he is going to be able to do. But after a few weeks, he begins to discover that retirement is not exactly what he thought it would be. The days start growing longer and the hours become more and more oppressive.

Or the promise heralded by the beginning of a New Year which turns out to be far from satisfactory!

All of us at some time in our life follow a star only to discover a stable. The problem is how to turn that stable into a moment of salvation. So what is it that enables wise people of every age to turn the stables of life into victory?

Well if we take those first “wise men” as a guide, we might well come up with an answer.

The first thing we can say about the original wise men is that although they end up in a stable, they came looking for God. They came looking for the new King which the star they had studied showed to have been born. And although the wise men ended up in a place that they did not expect, this did not stop them from making the most of it.

Often in life, when we are in a bad place we tend to think only of ourselves and how we can get ourselves out of the mess. We tend to rely on ourselves. But we also tend to feel like we have been forsaken by God otherwise why would he have let us get into this situation? We don't like to look for the best in these situations nor to make the most of them. Instead, when we are in a bad way, we often stop looking for God at all and for any good in our predicament.

But for the Wise men, the opposite was the case. Although they found themselves in a place they didn't expect, they did not close their minds to God's presence. In the end it didn't matter that the King they had come to worship was living in a stable, because for them the star had led them to the truth: The truth that God had become human and was turning upside down the values of the world. The wise men had found God in the most unlikely place.

The second thing we can learn from the wise men is that they offer their best to God. As we all know they offer gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh to the infant Christ. Gifts that were expensive and fit for Royalty. But if one reads the account of the visitation of the wise men again, you will see that the offering of gifts is not the first thing they do. The first thing they do is to offer themselves in humble adoration and praise to the new born king.

Their first gift to the King of all creation is of themselves and this is ultimately the best gift anyone can offer to God most high. Every year when we sing the carol “In the Bleak mid winter” I am reminded of this ultimate gift, for in the last first we sing:

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man I would do my part,  
Yet what I, can I give him: give my heart.

Christina Rossetti who wrote these words, knew all too well our human poverty and frailty, our desires and weaknesses, but she also knew that the greatest gift of all was of the self. Total and undivided giving of the self. When one first hears this one often thinks one should only offer up the best bits of oneself, the good bits, the bits that are worthy. But that's not what it means. Offering of oneself means oneself in its entirety – good and bad alike.

And the third thing we can learn from the wise men is that this event marks a new direction, a new beginning in their lives. As we have heard and know from the Christmas narratives, the wise men first looked for Jesus in the palace of Herod. They expected him to be born in splendour and live in earthly glory. But this revelatory experience of seeing Jesus in a stable and not in a palace changed the mindset of the distant travellers. Herod had asked them to return to him with word as to where Jesus was, but they didn't. They chose to travel home by another route.

As we are told in the story, they decided to follow this course of action after being warned in a dream, but it is also possible that their hearts may have been touched by this divine encounter. It is possible that they have at last seen God in all his glory lying in a squalid stable in poverty and decided not to return to the world of materialistic idolatry, where envy and hatred consume the hearts and desires of everyone, but to instead return home via the ways of peace and love?

No one can be certain why the wise men changed their course, but they did. And if I were a betting man my money would be on the divine revelation and encounter that had touched their hearts.

So what then can we learn from the Wise men in how to turn our stables into houses of salvation?

Firstly we can try to approach life with an open mind, and rather than expecting God to be found only in the good times or in our churches, to accept the certainty that God is with us wherever we are, whether we are metaphorically on top of the world or in a deepest darkest caverns of despair. Maybe we need to learn how not to pigeon-hole God and let him be wherever and however he is? Secondly we can give our best to God regardless, and our best is ourselves. And thirdly by giving of oneself and truly seeking God, we will change and the stables of our lives will perhaps become the new temples and shrines of our lives.

This Epiphany, like that first Epiphany, God is revealing himself to us and making manifest his promise. All too often we do not see him through our clutter, but maybe the wise men can help us in our journey?