

Happy New year: I'm going to start the little talk in church asking (a) what you're looking forward to this year and (b) when and whether you think those things are going to happen. Come what may, there are still vast unknowns about the coming months, and right now we're just setting out on a journey into the new year, which does give us something in common with the Magi - just setting out on a journey with all the unknowns.

Now I don't think it's helpful to get bogged down in the (did it happen ? Is it true but embellished ? Is it all imagery ?), we can then miss the real point. But this is not as fairy tale and as Arabian nights as it sounds.

Suetonius, the Roman historian, writing at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD "there had spread over the orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world". Tacitus refers to this belief as well. Josephus, the Jewish historian, writing even before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD does the same – in other words, there was a mood of heightened expectation, that something major was going to be happening soon in Israel.

As for stars: they were the one set thing in an uncertain world. So if a new one turned up, the logical assumption was that the divine was somehow breaking in in a new way.

And Magi ? They were a tribe of holy intellectuals in what was then Persia, advisors to the kings, and were philosophers, scientists and astrologers. Following omens and stars was their job.

So let's look at their attitude:

They were **searching, prepared to adventure**. As they set out on their journey, there were an awful lot of unknowns: they didn't have an itinerary. They were crossing some pretty barren terrain. There must have been potential danger in entering a foreign land. And maybe mistakes were made. In retrospect, going via Herod's palace was a big mistake. The whole thing was a journey with unexpected twists – even taking a different route home.

It's a picture of a journeying faith, not a fossilised faith, of expecting new discovery and direction.

I'm going to introduce you briefly to George Stevens, a highly intelligent man of 84, whom I met in our first parish in Norfolk and who lived out this whole attitude of journeying and adventure.

The first time I met him, he came bouncing up to me at the end of our first service there: "Hello, my name's George Stevens, and I'm on your side". And I think I loved him from that moment on. Honest, fun, wise.

About 2 years before he died, he went blind. And I asked him what life felt like, I suppose. He said, and I will never forget this: Well, I've always seen my life as a series of adventures, and this is a new chapter, and although it's hard, it's also in some ways a new adventure. And I've never been more convinced of the love of God than I am now.

Have a journeying faith, with new chapters, new explorations, not a fossilised religion.

**And yet they also showed total humility.** These people were greatly respected in their home country - their tribe had been the aristocratic rulers in Persia, were now more of a tribe of learned priests, but still greatly respected. And they entered a stable or outhouse or humble dwelling, and there they met people far less learned than them, less wealthy than them, and saw a tiny child - and bowed down and worshipped. What a picture of humility !

As we launch into this year of uncertainty and hope, can we at least commit ourselves to humility: a humility that knows we're going to get things wrong. The wardens, PCC and I will try and make good decisions, they will be wrong sometimes. Everyone is going to say some less than Christian words at some point and think some less than Christ-like thoughts. But we will remain a group who are committed to supporting and loving one another in spite of quirks and failings.

But humility is not just having a realistic view of ourselves, it's recognising God's greatness. Somehow, I guess, these Magi just knew. We don't get any idea that they asked Mary and Joseph a series of questions to check they'd come to the right place. They saw....they bowed down....they worshipped. I think they just knew that they were in the presence of the one they'd been led to look for. My sincere hope is that this year there will be times when each of us just **knows** we're in that presence. It's so easy, especially for folk like me, to get so absorbed in church and community stuff which we passionately believe in, that we lose sight of the one at the very heart of it, the child these Magi just instinctively knew was the one. May there be times when we simply know that presence of God, which is always far greater than our understanding or words. When bowing our knee, worshipping is not a forced response but the most natural thing in the world.