



‘How will we get to Bethlehem?’

Sermon for Christmas 2019 by Mark Pilgrim

When travelling in a car, how dependent are you or your driver on satnav? Some people don't seem to be able to get into a car without switching it on. Other people don't use it at all – the map they bought 20 years ago still does the job...until they find themselves at a junction that wasn't there 20 years ago! Still other people – me included, all too often – use it when I've got near to but can't actually find the destination...and then find something really awkward has happened – like my phone has run out of battery or that the place I'm at is in a GPS or mobile phone blind spot.

One of the questions Christmas asks is ‘How will we get to Bethlehem?’ I don’t mean literally ‘how can we get there?’. I mean figuratively ‘in our imaginations’. And not just once – at Christmas. How can we keep finding ourselves in Bethlehem – in a holy place, with God – throughout the year?

The four books of the Bible that tell us about the life of Jesus, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, have different takes and different teaching on how to stay close to Christ day by day. Of the four, two of them – Matthew and Luke - describe people going to Bethlehem and there encountering God in Christ. So let’s have a look at these journeys and see what we can learn from them.

First there’s Luke’s Gospel and its two journeys. The first involves Joseph and Mary and the unborn child. Their journey to Bethlehem comes about in the ordinary course of life. The Romans have decided to hold a census to count the number of people in and around Israel. Luke describes the journey in these words ‘Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem...he went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.’

How do they get to Bethlehem? Popular imagination has Mary travelling on the back of a donkey and Joseph walking all the way – a journey of 70 miles and more which, with Mary pregnant, probably took a week or more.

What's interesting about the journey for our purposes, when thinking about 'Bethlehem' as a destination in which to experience and be close to God, is that Joseph and Mary make this journey in the course of their everyday lives. There is no fanfare announcing: 'You are going to have an amazing, awesome time - you are going to meet God in a special, spectacular way!' In fact, Joseph and Mary might well have set out on their journey with dread. In the first place, Mary was pregnant and who knows what difficulties might have arisen for her during this time. Secondly Joseph and Mary were 'betrothed' but not yet married. Both of them might have been rejected by Joseph's family and relatives given the dishonour that having a child out of wedlock could have brought to the family at that time. So, for Joseph and Mary, getting to Bethlehem could well have been a disruptive nuisance at best and plain and simple dangerous at worst. And yet, at the end of their journey, (completed without satnav) they find themselves in Bethlehem, encountering God and fulfilling God's purposes in a special, never-to-be-repeated way: Mary gives birth to Jesus, God's Chosen One, the Messiah. Note how all this happens in the day-to-day, run-of-the-mill ordinariness of daily life.

The second travellers to Bethlehem in Luke's Gospel are shepherds. How do they get to Bethlehem? How do they get to encounter and experience God close up? Do they have the benefit of satnav? What's special about these travellers and their journey?

As many of you may know, shepherds were not the most well-regarded or popular group of people in Jesus' time. They were the very opposite of celebrities. Unless they were bringing back your sheep, their arrival would not have been eagerly or enthusiastically looked forward to. They would have been dirty and unkempt – spending days and weeks out in the open, awake all through the night and often suspected of getting up to no good while honest people were at home and in their beds at night. But it is to a group of these people - the equivalent today perhaps of workers in the insecure gig economy – that angels appear. The divine invitation to these unkempt and lowly night workers is to be the first to acknowledge Christ as Lord in Bethlehem. So, Luke says, the shepherds 'went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.'

Now we've done with Luke's two stories of 'Destination Bethlehem' we turn to Matthew. And what have we got here? Well, with the account of a star guiding Wise Men from the East to the house where Jesus was in Bethlehem, the nearest equivalent to satellite navigation you will find in the whole Bible!

How did the Wise Men get close to God by travelling to Bethlehem? They were guided by a star – or, more likely, a comet. Matthew's priorities are all very different to Luke's. Matthew's travellers to Bethlehem are guided not only by a heavenly body but also by great learning. They have undreamed of skill in understanding and interpreting the

movements of stars, comets and planets. They have wealth too, as their ability to travel over long distances and bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh testify. They must have had power and authority too – without it, why would Herod have granted them an audience?

So, there we have it. Three very different sets of people making their way to Bethlehem – there to encounter God in the person of Jesus. Each of them is called by God. Mary receives an angelic message, probably when a teenager, betrothed but not yet married to Joseph, both living in the unglamorous location of Nazareth in northern Israel. Joseph receives his call in a dream – and is faithful to it, fulfilling the call even though his reputation and family honour may have been severely tested and compromised by doing so. Like Mary, the looked-down-upon shepherds receive an angelic message and make their way from the margins of society to the centre of God's kingdom. And the wise men – representing the non-Jewish world over whom God is also sovereign – make their way to Bethlehem, there to encounter God in Christ, in a context which is fraught with political tension and may also have involved elements of personal danger.

Like these travellers, we too are called to Bethlehem. We too are being called to encounter God in Christ. We too are being called to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God – every day of our lives. The question for us all is 'how are we going to meet with and spend time with Christ in the year ahead?'

And ‘what difference will we and other people see in our lives when we do?’

One of the Church of England’s targets is that its members are actively involved in caring for God’s world. Every year St Peter’s Church Council draws up its own local targets to achieve. Top of the list for 2020, in order to contribute to the Diocese of Bristol’s Climate Emergency resolution to be net carbon zero by 2030, could well be that St Peter’s will reduce its carbon footprint by 7.5% during 2020. Achieving that target will involve some very practical discipleship. How much heating does the church need? How can we organise what we do and how we do it to be, in ball park figures, around 10% less costly in relation to the environment than we have been in 2019? These are massive challenges. We will need commitment and courage when starting to implement such changes, especially if, as we look around and see that, as we begin to move out of our comfort zones and take on additional commitments to protect the environment, other people, near and far, are carrying on regardless. But a Christian community that is responding to and is disciplined about the climate crisis could be a beacon of light and hope and a means of getting people to take God seriously as difficulties in the world increase.

So the steps we take at the beginning of 2020 to address the climate crisis could be the first small steps we take to getting to Bethlehem – encountering God and doing God’s will - long term. Our Lent Groups in 2020 will follow the ‘Say Yes to Life’

Church of England national programme on this subject. If you are a regular here at St Peter's, please mark this in your calendars now as something for you to do in Lent. And if you are a visitor to St Peter's, I encourage you to think of addressing the climate crisis as a key part of your Christian discipleship.

So, to the question 'How are you getting to Bethlehem – how are you drawing close to God in Christ as 2019 turns to 2020' how do you respond? As you think about your spiritual life, are you dependent on some form of satnav to guide you? By 'satnav' I mean 'Are you relying on someone else's process, some outside agency to somehow magically transport you close to God and do all the hard work for you? Or, in order to be close to God and 'get to Bethlehem', will you reflect the journey of the biblical characters?

What scope, I wonder, is there for you, like Mary and Joseph, to encounter God and discover Christ in your everyday, '9-5' life? What scope, I wonder, is there for you, like the shepherds, to be drawn from the edge, to be drawn from the dark, to be drawn in muck and messiness to encounter God and find Christ in a surprising, out of the way place? What scope, I wonder, is there for you, like the Wise Men, to look for God's presence from outside the self-identifying communities of 'the people of God' and, coupling brain power with spiritual sensitivity, encounter God and discover Christ in a way which allows you to offer your gifts to him?

Let's have a period of quiet now to ponder our response to these questions – a time which will end with a poem entitled The Road to Bethlehem

THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things and again things;
If we consider ourselves so important that we must fill
Every moment of our lives with action...

When will we have the time to make the long slow journey
Across the burning desert as did the Magi?
Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds?
Or to brood over the coming of the Child as did Mary?

For each one of us there is a desert to travel,
A star to discover,
And a being within ourselves to bring to life.