

Sunday 3 January 2016

Isaiah 60: 1-6 and Matthew 2: 1-12

December 2015 was a dreary month. Days went by with little light. On one memorable afternoon, I recall the air turning a weird shade of sepia. But did you notice that some nights were clear? The full moon on Christmas Day was a wonderful bright silver, shining across the sky, bringing a white light into the garden. It felt like it was a beacon. And New Year's Eve too, the stars were shining. At 5 minutes to midnight, the sky was a deep dark blue/black, punctured by twinkling stars. For 10 minutes after midnight, the sky was full of fireworks – golds, greens and reds – starbursts and rockets. And then at 10 past, it reverted to blue/black and silver. Light shining into the darkness.

Isaiah writes of the light. Light that signifies the glory of the Lord. Light that will draw people to God. Light that will make people radiant. Light that will change us. The Magi followed a star which led them to Jesus. Jesus, who we know as the personification of God, is described as himself being the light of the world. In the prayer we pray following communion, we ask that, as people whom the Spirit lights, we might bring light to the world.

But we are not wind up torches. What can it mean to bring light to the world?

Well, how about looking at the things that the main players in the Christmas story were asked to do. It's probably best not to dwell too much on the dramatic manner in which they were asked to do it – angels tend not to pop up much. They were actually asked to do very ordinary and everyday roles and activities. Helen Collins who leads the vocations ministry in Bristol Diocese describes the callings as: 'Be a father. Be a mother. Be a loving husband. Visit a homeless family. Take a present to a new-born baby. These are activities that we can relate to and perhaps already engage in. And yet, (she says) these familiar activities are made sacred by a call from God which gives the recipients divine purpose and eternal significance within their ordinariness'.

So, we are asked to be ordinary, are we? I think we are. God is an everyday God, we are asked to be everyday people, who are inspired and motivated to work, to pray, to care, to laugh, to find the good in things, because we are the recipients of God's love.

Paula Gooder writes that the birth, life, ministry and death of Jesus all point to a Jesus who was not only unafraid of the ordinary, but he positively embraced it. At the start of his life the Magi looked for him in the wrong place. We have to look for him in unexpected places too, places you wouldn't expect to find a king in, the ordinary places. To find Jesus reflected in the lives of ordinary people.

So we are to be ordinary people who can bring light into dark places. Each of us will have a different gift or talent to do that. Again Helen Collins puts it this way:

We are to celebrate the diversity of callings that God gives. Zechariah could not have had Mary's call. Mary could not have had Elizabeth's call. The shepherds could not do what the Magi did. We are each made unique with a bespoke call and vocation. Your call may be to the workplace or community work, to church ministry or family life, to entrepreneurial ventures or scientific discovery or creation care or politics or youth work.

Would that we were all regularly using this language of call and vocation to express that we had a mission from God and learn to be confident in that.

And in case you find that list all a bit daunting, Valerie Peters made me laugh this week when she described one of her many gifts as being a giver of hugs. Your call may be supremely practical or supremely cerebral. It is likely to be very ordinary.

But we need to be careful not to become stuck. It might be that God wants us to change what we have thought of as our vocation. Some of you subscribed to daily Stewardship emails last Lent. Some of you may have received the ones they sent out during Advent and Christmas. The one about the Magi included these words:

Intentional with their time, their talents and their gifts, the Magi were also open enough to pause, listen and re-plan: God's wisdom and will took precedence over their human understanding.

We are asked to consider if God is asking us to take a detour, to 'go back by another route'. I know that there are times when I have to go with God's flow. 2015 was a year of change of pace and responsibility for me, for example I never thought at the beginning of 2015 that I would spend so much time learning about depression and anxiety in the workplace. Our lives have the potential to be constantly moulded and shaped by events and by other people. I don't think life and our response to it, allows us to stand still. Yet, in the midst of what can feel like darkness and confusion, we are not left alone, bereft and without support, there is a light.

The Magi brought gifts to Jesus, we are encouraged to think about the gifts that we would bring, but what about the gift that Jesus gives us? He gives us love and through his Holy Spirit enables us to love others.

In her series of lectures: God and Caesar, Shirley Williams writes of the transforming power of love. 'Families and friends are transformed by love. Love of a child, of a spouse, of God; a force so strong it can light up the human presence. Yet we rarely speak of its power. Our societies appear cynical, hard boiled, money-driven, but in fact, they (we) are famished for lack of love'.

As we take the gifts and talents that we have, may we learn to use them with love, so that the spaces we inhabit, the people we meet, may see the light of that love and maybe through it, glimpse the glory of God.

Amen

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