

Ideas for reflective worship 07/01/24

Theme: Scripture reveals God to us, as the visit by the Magi revealed God to them.

Read – The journey of the Magi

Yes. I know it seems odd to talk about scripture revealing God to us and then picking a reading that is not scriptural. Apologies to anyone looking forward to hearing Matthew's account of the Magi's journey but I have always been struck by the starkness of this poem. Contrast it with the glamour of the average nativity play. Just before Christmas I had a fascinating conversation with a grandson who played 'the gold king' in his school nativity. In his eyes the three kings were like the medal winners, with the gold king in particular cast for his ability to stand in the right place! The voice writing this poem doesn't sound very like a medal winner, in fact he seems unsure as to whether he would even want to win a prize.

He describes the meeting with the Christ child in one word – satisfactory, but leaves us no concept of what that really implies. Certainly not that it was a life changing moment. But as we continue to read we learn that it was a life changing moment. They returned to their old lives but were unable to settle. They had travelled to see a birth, but it had proved not to be the joyful event they anticipated but a bitter experience as it highlighted the negatives of their old life. And the writer concludes that if this was death, he would be glad to see it again.

The journey, the experience, of this magus was unexpected in its outcomes. He had thought to celebrate the arrival of a new and significant person, that is why the magi take the gifts that signify his future life. But once there, there seemed little to celebrate, perhaps just ordinariness. However what is significant is not his short-term disappointment but his long term understanding. For him this was a pivotal moment in his life and the poet has him sharing it with us. 'I should be glad of another death'.

Now I know that is only one person's imagined memory of an event, described differently by Matthew in his gospel, and its consequences but we personally also have stories that mark pivotal moments in our faith.

In the autumn we were at Widney school, about to do an Open the Book session – The Great Escape – when Richard suddenly said, 'This is the story that started it for me. This is the start of my faith journey'. It is Richard's story so I will leave him to tell it.

Read Exodus 14:15-29

Richard's story

I had no religious upbringing at all. However, when one Easter time the classic film the Ten Commandments was on television I determined to watch it because I was curious. So, I remember videoing it and then watching it over the next few days. It is of course the story of Moses and the Exodus - but I remember very clearly the moment in the film where the Israelites are in front of the Red Sea, with the Egyptians chasing them down. I was Mesmerised by seeing what happened: the parting of the sea.

I was so curious that I decided to look this up in the Bible. There was only one Bible we had in the house, a Good News version, which a friend of the family had given us; so I began to read Exodus. When I got to the bit in Exodus 14 of the parting of the sea, I felt very strongly inside me that I was being asked a question. It was as if God was saying to me "Do you believe in me, do you think I'm real, can I be your God?". I realised then that I had to make a decision in life about whether God

existed or not. I decided “yes I do think you exist” and it was if the Red Sea parted right in front of me. I went through and the adventure began.

And I also have a story.

My granddad was a wise man and when there were grandchildren staying instead of the rather straightlaced church in the centre of Torquay that my grandparents usually attended he took us to a church in Babbacombe that was very good at welcoming visitors. The first thing I noticed when we got there was a coach full of Boys Brigade lads going into the church. The second thing was the notice board. ‘Seven men in a boat! Speaker Mr’ Unfortunately, 60 years on I have no idea of the name.

Read John 21: 1-6

He was a good speaker and fully engaged both this 10 year old and the boys brigade. He spoke about going to sea in a small boat. He made the point that although we know the names of some of the seven men who went fishing that night, there are two who are unnamed. He ignored the customary wisdom that these were the seven Galilean disciples, brought up to fish. And he speculated about the other two. They were not thought to be important enough for John to name them, I wonder if he was unable to name them, certainly by the time he was writing his gospel. They could have been anyone, they could have been you and me.

They could have been you and me, but yet they were privileged to meet with the risen Christ and to share breakfast. They were present at what was a pivotal moment for the early church. But they were not important enough to be named. They were just two ordinary people. And if they could meet with the risen Christ, so could we. Compare this incident with the communion service. Where we remember the risen Christ in the sharing of food and drink.

At that point the Bible for me ceased to be just a story book. All those things in Sunday school not just an excuse to keep the children occupied. But it all had a purpose. Not surprisingly it still took , and continues to take, many years to make proper sense of all of that.

But the immediate significance was not always clear. The wise man found his visit to the infant Christ simply satisfactory, although that developed into his unease with his old life. The Israelites fled Egypt to in their minds safety from slavery only to discover the anxiety of a nomadic life, before finally they settled in the promised land. I went taken to church by my Grandad and found out why we were there, although it takes years to really understand what that means.

Yesterday we went with a couple of grandchildren to see the Lion the witch and the wardrobe. Holly wanted to know why the faun was not included in the title and I toyed with a long explanation as to why Aslan was God – the interval does last 20 minutes. But then I remembered my own refusal to read the book as a child because my mother had told me that it was about Jesus, so I settled for a more vague explanation about forces of good and evil and the link between them. There are some things we must discover for ourselves.

All those passages we have read this afternoon seem to have something in common. They are important moments in the lives of the people concerned, they lead to big life changes. Richard and I would say they led to us having big life changes. Scripture has been instrumental in revealing God to us, and continues to develop our understanding. Are they endings or beginnings? I think the answer to that question is simply. Yes. They are endings and beginnings, possibly only of a certain mindset, the start of a new clarity.

While we play some music, we are inviting you to think whether or not there is a passage that for you has a special significance, and possibly share it with us all after the music ends.