

**Epiphany**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> January**  
**Shirley Williams**

Matthew 2 1-12, Isaiah 60 1-6

I wonder how many Christmas cards you have with the three wise men or kings on them. I seem to have quite a few and I know I sent some. The pictures are quite stylised aren't they? Three men, richly dressed, wearing crowns or turbans, sometimes riding camels. This image is reinforced by the traditional nativity play with old velvet curtains turned into cloaks and gold card used for crowns, although casting problems mean that there are often pages as well and some of them are girls. These images become so fixed in our minds from childhood that we perhaps lose sight of who these people were and what drove them to make the journey which Matthew described.

So let's have a closer look at them. The first thing to note was that they were scholars or wisemen rather than kings and they were likely to have come from Persia or Babylon. Among other things they studied astrology but they were also familiar with sacred writings from various faiths. Thus it is likely that they were aware of the prophecies of Isaiah, including the one we read today which is possibly why their gifts for Jesus included gold and frankincense.

The fact that three gifts are mentioned in the gospels has led us to speak of three wise men but we have nothing to confirm that this is true. Also they would not have set off alone. It is more likely that they set off on the journey with a large entourage of guards and attendants. Our traditional images of the wise men also gloss over the nature of the journey itself. It was a huge undertaking – if as some commentators suggest they were travelling from Babylon this was a journey of about 800 miles, not that far in modern terms providing there is no snow, breakdowns strikes or other calamities, but on camels? 20 miles a day would seem to be quite likely – that means a

journey of 40 days. It would have taken some organisation to keep everything on track. There were probably times when hunger, tiredness and discomfort made some of them wonder if they should have started out at all.

So what kept them going? Why didn't they give up? They must have been convinced that it was important for them to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews but would that have been enough when things got really tough on the journey? I'm not sure. But what that did have as a constant reminder was the star which was guiding them. You could imagine that if some of them were beginning to grumble or feel like turning back the sight of the star and the fact that it was guiding them would encourage them to keep going. They were rewarded at the end of their journey with meeting Jesus and Matthew says that they were overjoyed.

As I looked at these readings I began to think about journeys – I am sure we all have journeys which stick out in your minds either because they were exciting or interesting or perhaps because they were difficult. But then I began to think of our other associations with the word journey, our journey of life or our journey of faith. It's traditional to look back on the year that has just gone, for many people there are some really challenging, difficult times as well as happy ones. Certainly when I look back 2009 was a real roller coaster of a year with some highs and deep lows and I guess that's true for most of us.

Whatever happened to us we are now standing at the beginning of 2010 so what was it that kept us going? Of course the love and support of friends and family, sometimes our own grit and determination but above all for us as Christians we have the assurance of God's love and presence with us.

Just as the wise men had the star guiding them we have that promise that God is always there even when we are in the depths of despair. Quote from paper. 'I was widowed when I was 34 and my daughters were 8, 6 and 3. I had always been a regular churchgoer and during that terrible time my faith became a more living thing it was a case of seeing stars in the darkness. I became increasingly aware of God's presence and

although in no way did I see him as an insurance policy at its most basic it was as if I was saying ‘ I can’t cope with this, over to you.’ The values of our modern society encourage us to see independence and self reliance as important but the values of the kingdom lead us to dependence – John Stott says that Christian maturity is shown by dependence rather than independence.

So, as we begin this new year I wonder how you are feeling – maybe excited by things you are looking forward to, perhaps you are fearful or worried about what might happen, maybe just at the moment you are listening to my words and they sound very hollow because you are really struggling and everything seems black. Whatever your situation take courage. Just as the star was a constant guide for the wise men so God’s love and concern are a constant for us. He holds on to us even when we feel incapable of holding on to him.

In a moment we are going to be reminded of God’s faithfulness towards us through his covenant promise to us when he showed the strength of his love for us through the gift of his son. When the wise men reached the end of their journey our reading tells us they were overjoyed and bowed down and worshiped him. Today we are also encouraged to respond by offering ourselves again to serve him in whatever way he calls us so that others too will come to know his constant presence with them.