

A Season of Song

A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 10 January 2021 (Epiphany Sunday)

*As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold,
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright,
so, most gracious Lord, may we
evermore be led to thee.*

by William Chatterton Dix, 1860
(*Singing the Faith*, 224)

For a number of years, I would join some friends for a New Year retreat. It was at the Benedictine Priory in Burford. It was often snowy and we were usually there for the Day of Epiphany. The community would celebrate the day with a special meal and joyful worship. Until that time, I had not given much thought to Epiphany. The beginning of the year for me was about back to the daily routine; Advent and Christmas over for another year. The Burford monks made me re-consider.

This time of the Christian year is really three seasons-in-one. Advent, Christmas and finally Epiphany have their own distinctive character. Our hymnbook, *Singing the Faith*, suggests that the weeks of Epiphany are the time of 'the Revealed Christ'. It is time to consider the meaning of the birth of this person not just sing about it. The story of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel sets the scene for our worship for the rest of January's Sundays. Strangers from the East arrive seeking, asking and knocking on the doors of people who might know what is going on.

In the hymn '*As with gladness men of old*' we are encouraged to inhabit the story, travel with the visitors and follow the star.

Each of the first three verses hinge on the word 'so'. Like the Magi we are to meet the Christ child gladly ready to offer our gifts to him. The verses suggest the pattern which is followed by all Christian worship:

- we are drawn into the presence of God by awe-struck enquiry, not driven by fear or coercion.
- we are called to contemplate the kindness of the Creator of heaven and earth.
- we are renewed by divine mercy and release our most precious gifts into the hands of God.

It is to be hoped that we leave worship in some way changed by the experience so that like the Magi we 'return home by another road'. Not always maybe, but sometimes – or what was the point of the starting the journey? It is this experience of transformation which occupies the last two verses of the Epiphany carol.

The Christian journey through life is not a walk into oblivion, but into the glory which is 'the heavenly country bright'. There's no saying when we will arrive but it is our true home.

I was once told by an elderly member of my church that the most important part of the service was the Blessing. She insisted that I should always use 'the Lord bless *you*' and not the more inclusive '*us*'. For, as she explained, they might be the last words she would hear in the worship of God's people on earth before she received the complete experience of God's blessing in heaven.

It was a deep learning for me.

Magi come in all shapes and sizes and you never know when they will come knocking at the door of the church, ready to give and to disturb in equal measure.

Prayer:

God of disconcerting strangers,
help us not to fear what is unfamiliar
and see the work of your Spirit
in all that creates a path into
the glory of your Kingdom
on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen.