

An invitation to existential well being

Sermon Epiphany Sunday 8 January 2023

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Isaiah 60.1-6, Matthew 2.1-12

Many of you will know that our diocese of Oxford is linked with several overseas dioceses – one for each of our episcopal areas; South Africa, India and Sweden. It broadens our horizons, reminding us that we are part of a global Anglican church, not just the Church of England. It's easy for us to hunker down in our own familiar space, whether it's our parish, or church or diocese. That's especially the case if we feel threatened in some way; the space in which we feel safe to operate, as it were, becomes smaller. We may be aware of that at present with all the different challenges we face; challenges of which we are constantly made aware through our media. We don't really want to be made aware of anything else that might disturb us. Our links with other parts of the world through our diocese, though, encourage us to orient ourselves towards a bigger picture, one where we are connected to others of the same faith yet experiencing different challenges; to recognise a connectedness, a kinship if you like, because of our shared faith. We are invited to open our eyes to a bigger world.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah this morning the prophet speaks to all those Israelites who have at last returned from exile and were now living in their own country. Their return had been eagerly awaited. There were many hopes and dreams bound up in it. The reality, though, was harsh, unremitting hard work as they had to rebuild their houses, reclaim neglected farm land and deal with hostility from neighbours. So here is the prophet pointing them to a bigger picture, one that encourages them to 'lift up their eyes' (Isaiah 60.4). We can imagine them bent over their land replanting, or digging the foundations of their homes, constantly looking down. 'Look up', says the prophet. See the bigger picture.

Bishop Fredrik in our link diocese of Växjö spoke recently of the importance attached in Sweden to well being - physical, emotional and spiritual (in its widest sense). But, he asked, 'What about existential well being?' He went on to explain that as meaning a connection to an infinitely bigger picture, a bigger story, than our own personal circumstances. If each of us individually is the limit of who we are, then we live in a claustrophobically small world ruled only by ourselves. Looking out, though, peering over the walls of our own circumstances, we may find a far more expansive perspective- one with greater hope, more wonder, wholeness and deeper connections with others. Perhaps we long for that. I wondered if that was part of the motive for those wise men travelling so far to find the new king? Their own world had become too small. They longed for something bigger and they were ready to travel many miles in search of it.

The account of what we call the Epiphany – the journey of these wise men - only appears in Matthew's gospel. By including it Matthew is inviting those first

hearers of his gospel to a bigger perspective. I'm tempted to say that he was writing for their existential well being, but that's being anachronistic! He is writing for mainly Jewish Christians at a time when more and more non Jews ('gentiles') were turning to Christ. There was probably some discomfort, perhaps resentment, about this. What about the pivotal role of the Jews, some Christians might have been asking? Matthew's gospel affirms these Christians in their Jewishness by demonstrating Jesus' own Jewishness and how he fulfilled many OT prophecies (note our reading from Isaiah with its reference to gold and frankincense). *And..* and this is the expanding, bigger picture bit – he reminds them that even in their past God's plan was to invite those outside Israel's borders into a relationship with him. Here, at the start of his gospel are these foreigners, these outsiders, coming not just to offer gifts, but to worship the child Jesus. How Jewish is that, Matthew is asking? How true to what we know about God from his dealings with us in the past? These gentile converts are not a threat but rather a sign that God is fulfilling those promises from long ago in our past. And then at the end of his gospel Matthew places Jesus' command to his followers is to make disciples of *all nations* (Mtt 28.19) and not only the descendants of Abraham. He bookends his gospel with those reminders of a bigger picture.

Bishop Fredrik called his address to the Swedish Church 'A church worthy of the name'. Rather like Matthew when addressing Jewishness he was saying that given their churchness, if you like, there were certain things that could be taken for granted, most especially their capacity to offer existential well being to a society that had lost touch with a bigger picture and was so often lacking in hope, wonder and wholeness. Were they themselves aware enough of that bigger picture or were they pressed down by the burden of church maintenance, the soaring cost of petrol, the long dark Swedish winter? Could they look up and share hope with those who had never encountered the offer of new life, forgiveness, vibrant community?

The wise men can be like role models for a church. They looked up, they glimpsed a bigger picture and they took the risk of setting off on a long journey in order to find it. On encountering Jesus they bowed down, they worshipped him, they opened their treasures, offering them to him. Their encounter resulted in recognising God's voice in a dream and returning home a different way. There is a pattern here that many will recognise – that sense that there is something more, taking a risk to leave behind certain things in order to discover what it might be, finding what we were looking for in an unexpected place, being moved by the recognition to perhaps awe or generosity and returning to our familiar circumstances, but with something inside us having shifted. It's a pattern that develops existential well being. It's a pattern familiar to Christians. It's in our scriptures. It's our treasure. It's a narrative attractive to those with no church connections searching for something more. A church worthy of the name will want to share that treasure. Perhaps at the start of this new year we can hear that voice from our link diocese in Sweden challenging us to do just that.