

Sermon for Epiphany 2026 by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 60. 1-6; Matthew 2. 1-12

Stargazing

Back in the day, when I used to pick my kids up from school, I would inevitably ask the same question that 99% of parents ask: 'How was your day?' Occasionally I'd mix it up a bit with the catchier 'So, school; how was it?'. And like 99% of other parents, I'd receive exactly the same one-word answer: 'Okay'.

It took me a while to realise that if I wanted more, I'd have to pursue a slightly different line of enquiry. So, I'd ask 'who did you play with today?' or, 'what did you have for lunch?'. Again, one-word answers.

The problem of course was that I was asking closed questions which shut down conversations rather than open them up. Late in the day, I learnt to ask more open questions like 'what was your favourite part of today?'

That's actually a powerful question. It teaches us, whatever our age, to reflect and take notice of the good things that are in every day. And that's a game-changer. If we take that question one step further to 'why?', then we go deeper into appreciation and self-understanding; we learn that curiosity and gratitude are some of the best spiritual disciplines.

Another great question of course is 'what was your least favourite part of today?', and it's supplementary; 'what did you learn from that?'. This is actually an ancient spiritual practice called the Examen, a great way to end every day; my favourite and least favourite parts of today. And it's a great practice as we stand at the threshold of another year.

A New Year is a good time to reflect, hopefully with gratitude, on what this past year brought and taught, the ways it deepened us through both its highs and its lows. For some of us there have been lots to treasure, many uplifting memories made, many reasons to be grateful. For others, our only reason to be grateful perhaps is simply that it's over.

For the Church this is the season of Epiphany, which literally means 'revelation' or 'realisation'.

And that's so apt for a New Year into which we step blindly, asking that as it unfolds, so our eyes will be opened to the Presence of God in each and every moment; trusting that whatever happens, our God is with us.

Epiphany is the story of mysterious stargazers who, having studied the alignment of planets (the 'star' of the story), set off on a long and perilous journey to pay homage to a faraway newborn king. This journey was a huge act of faith, endurance and courage; a stepping into the unknown, a trusting that the stars had indeed aligned and spoken.

And of course, they headed for the 'right' place for a king, the palace, which, as we know, turned out to be the wrong place, a dangerous place in fact.

As we navigate life, we make decisions that don't always lead us to the 'right' place.

Some people think that God has a 'right' and perfect plan for each of our lives, and our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to work out that right and perfect plan. Experience tells me however that that isn't how God or life works. It's a lot more open-ended and nuanced and messy.

I believe that God knows all that can be known, the general flow of the future, but not necessarily the details. That's open. So, there might be a thousand, thousand ways forward. If we take a 'wrong' step, then God works with that. In all things, we're told, he works for good. Like the magi, after their 'wrong' detour, he sends us new information via others, helps us re-route, and then after, sends us home another way.

God's dream, I believe, is that we fulfill as much of our potential as we possibly can and that we leave this world a better place than we found it. Just how we do that doesn't require a map. It's actually more about stargazing. With an open mind and open heart, we fix our eyes on Christ, the Morning Star. As best we can, we make him our compass.

Life is a series of questions 'do I go this way or that way?'. And some of those answers are straightforward and some definitely aren't. In many cases, God probably does have a preference; 'this way is better, trust me'.

And he has his ways of communicating that, so we try to be as open as we can. Most often, he speaks through prayer as we open ourselves to his wisdom and persuasion. Often, that comes through our conscience, our gut, the changing of our minds. Sometimes he speaks through wise counsel, sometimes through scripture.

When I came back from Sabbatical last year, for a while I felt disorientated and went through quite a stressful period of self-doubt. I found it hard to settle to pray. But I know that's exactly the time when I need that sustaining rhythm. One morning somehow, instinctively I knew that something in the Bible readings for that day had something personally to say to me. And there it was, leaping from a verse in Psalm 143; 'lead me on a level path'. Those words, written millennia ago, in another world, another context, I knew were for me in that moment. And they became my prayer as I began to reorientate and find my balance again.

The gifts that the Magi brought were symbolic and prophetic of the life and mission of Christ. They spoke of who he was and who he would become. Tonight, at Soul Sunday we'll be exploring those gifts and how they are also symbols of our own lives and of those things that we too might need to bring and leave at his feet.

As we step into a New Year, with all its promise and uncertainty, remember that we do not step alone. So, may God lead us on a level path, gifting us with courage, with curiosity and with gratitude. And may we know this, our God is not only with us, but ahead of us, waiting.

Blessing

May your eyes be opened to the wonder of the daily miracles around you and your sense of mystery be deepened.

May you be aware of the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness can never put out.

May you be blessed with companions on the journey, friends who will listen to you and encourage you with their presence.

May you learn to live with what is unsolved in your heart, daring to face the questions and holding them until, one day, they perhaps find their answers.

May you find the still quiet place inside yourself where you can know and experience the peace that passes understanding.

May love flow in you and through you to those who need your care.

And may you continue to dream dreams and to reach out into the future with a deeper understanding of God's way for you.