

## **FOLLOW THE STAR**

The events in Bethlehem two thousand years ago were the completion of the prophecy and the stories related to that Great prophesy which we heard about during December. Our theme today is a simple yet nevertheless poignant one – it is about 'Following the star' (Matthew 2.1-12) and that 'Christ came for all peoples'. Although The Star leading the wise men came to rest, the story continues. It is the story of God, His Son Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and about ourselves as the Church and as the Children of the Light who follow the star.

Readings:

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

The term to - 'follow the star' has a number of meanings.

### **Stars and Celebrities**

There are those who follow a football team called Newtongrange Star. They use the term - 'Follow the Star' – to mean - following their team. Prior to being named Newtongrange Star, the football team went by the name of Lothian Star, which was the same name as a temperance society, also based in Newtongrange around 1872.

There is a plant called the 'Star-of-Bethlehem'. It's an aggressive little plant with attractive flowers - a member of the Lily family. Another cultivated plant, the *Ornithogalum nutans*, is known as the Nodding Star-of-Bethlehem.

The North Star is the prominent pole star that lies closest in the sky to the north celestial pole and which appears (approximately) directly overhead at the Earth's North Pole. It is the brightest star. The North Star has historically been used for navigation, both to find the direction of north and to determine latitude. It is used by lost campers to find their way back home. It always appears due north in the sky.

Confucius said: "*He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star; which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it.*"

We also have people who are stars, such as film and entertainment stars, and celebrities.

Milton Berle said:

*"I'd rather be a could-be if I cannot be an are;*

*because a could-be is a maybe who is reaching for a star.*

*I'd rather be a has-been than a might-have-been, by far;*

*for a might have-been has never been, but a has was once an are."*

The late Freddie Mercury of the rock band Queen said: *"I'm not going to be a star, I'm going to be a legend"*- This implies a legend to be superior to a star, in some way or other. The Brothers Grimm described legend as a *"folktale grounded in history"*. Ernst Bernheim suggested that legend *"is simply the survival of rumour"*.

The song - *"Gonna Make You a Star"* was a number 1 hit for David Essex in 1974. And BB King, the American blues musician and songwriter – sung a song called – *"Tonight I'm Gonna Make You A Star"*.

A number of famous stars unfortunately lived rather tragic lives - people like Judy Garland, Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, John Lennon – the list seems endless. There are many stars for whom stardom has been less than a happy experience.

Marilyn Monroe said on seeing her name up in lights for the first time: *"God, somebody's made a mistake"*. She tried to tell herself she was not a star. Yet there it was - up in lights.

There was a film called *'The Star'*, made in 1952 starring Bette Davis. The plot told the story of a washed up actress who tries anything to restart her failing career. She is rather over-confident she can build herself up again and somehow fix her career. After she receives another rejection for a leading role in a new film, she gets drunk and ends up in jail. Then she is offered to play a role in a new film about a falling star who can't face the fact that her career is all over. That new script was dedicated to those actors and actresses who all the time thought about what they looked like, what kind of impression they made, being demanding, even bribing, their overriding ambition for power and success, to stay on top at all costs, those who can't look down at being anything less than the best, or the greatest in their field....

A musical called *"Follow the Star"*, opened in London in 1975. The show retells the story of Mary & Joseph. Angels and a bright star lead Three

Wise Men to the baby. The good guys are victorious over Herod, and Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus are sent on their way with a happy song.

There was a film called "*Follow A Star*". It was a British comedy made in 1959 starring Norman Wisdom. The story is rather similar to the ending of *Singin' in the Rain*, where a singer fraudulently "borrows" the voice of Norman Wisdom's character.

Nowadays we are familiar with the term 'celebrities'. These are people who are well known, but not quite a star. A celebrity is someone who gets media attention and usually has an extrovert personality. There are a number of ways people can become celebrities, from their profession, appearances in the mass media, beauty or even by complete accident or infamy.

And we now have 'reality stars' and celebs being created by TV programmes. 'Instant celebrity' - is the term that is used when someone becomes a celebrity in a very short period of time. Someone that somehow achieves a small amount of transient fame through hype or mass media attention may be stereotyped as a B-grade celebrity.

In the recent past, the insatiable public fascination for celebrities and our appetite for celebrity gossip has seen the rise of the gossip columnist, the tabloid, paparazzi and celebrity internet blogging.

Prime ministers regularly invite stars and celebrities to meet them at 10 Downing Street, though this is nothing new. US President Ronald Reagan invited Michael Jackson to the White House and a succession of big name stars followed him there. Harold Wilson met the Beatles in 1964, although that meeting backfired when John Lennon made a joke about the soon to be PM. In recent years the frequent public meetings between politicians and stars or celebs has become almost a feature of life at the top.

These sorts of events gave us the term 'photo-opportunity'. But why do politicians go to such lengths to meet with stars and celebs? Politicians probably think there is some advantage in being associated with famous people. It may also be about raising money for political parties – famous stars and celebs tend to be wealthy. Some PM's have a tendency to forget the stars correct names afterwards, which suggests they are not really fans as such.

Many people, especially the young, aspire to be a star or a celeb and we now have endless TV shows dedicated to making 'dreams come true'. But celebs and stars lives tend to be lived outside of and distant from

mainstream society, in ivory towers; an ivory tower can be defined as 'a state of sheltered and unworldly intellectual isolation'.

This is not a new phenomenon - the term 'ivory tower' was first mentioned in the Bible, in *Song of Solomon 7:4*.

*"Thy neck is as a tower of ivory....."*

That biblical allusion was to the notion of ivory towers as symbols of virginal purity. The contemporary figurative meaning is of a place of unworldly isolation. Frederick Rothwell said:

*"Each member [of society] must be ever attentive to his social surroundings - (and).. avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower."*

It's inevitable that stars and celebs views will be coloured by their own everyday experiences, which tend to be quite separate from the majority of the population. Unlike Jesus, today's stars and celebs mostly choose not to live amongst the people. The greatest star of all - Jesus - lived amongst his people, the ordinary everyday people. What does that say about those political leaders who go out of their way to be seen with today's stars and celebs?

Today's stars and celebs use their wealth to separate themselves from the rest of us. Fear no doubt has a part to play. Stars and Celebs and their families may be under threat of kidnap for example, and constant attention from the media. Maybe they have no choice.

Celebs and stars may pay a high price for their fame. Yet still many ordinary people, especially the younger generation, seek to adulate the stars, and emulate their lifestyle. Many in society live beyond their means in this effort. There is inevitably a cost involved- credit card debt, record bankruptcies, a broken economy, crime, and broken families and relationships.

Our society today suffers from an epidemic of wannabees and the media feeds the virus. I wannabee this! I wannabee that! A wannabee is a person who would like to be different from how they are at present. Wannabees would like to become famous stars, or admired by the world at large. Often they are aspiring pop singers or instrumentalists, or performing artistes, or presenters of some kind. They wannabee a star or a celeb.

Many people have lived beyond their means in an effort to achieve a lifestyle that is beyond them. The recent collapse of our economy is no accident. It is based in large part on private debt which was used to fuel excessive consumption – on houses, cars, holidays, fashions, fancy restaurants, nightclubs, electronic gadgets and so on.

Those of us involved in the B&B and hotel business know all about Visit Scotland/STB and its Star grading system on quality classification. Grades range from 1-star to 5 star. I attended a Visit Scotland seminar once and was told that accommodation providers should look to the Gleneagles Hotel as something of a role model. I'm not sure that many visitors to Scotland would be able to afford the room price at Gleneagles of over £400 for one night's stay, or a luxury suite at over £2,000 a night - breakfast included! Perhaps this is the type of place only stars and celebs can afford, or quite possibly bankers with their bonuses, or 'senior' politicians. Perhaps Gleneagles Hotel is an 'ivory tower'?

Everyone knows the song "*When You Wish upon a Star*". It was a popular song introduced in the 1940 Disney film *Pinocchio*, where it was sung by the character Jiminy Cricket.

In many countries the song has become a Christmas song, often referring to the *Star of Bethlehem*. In Scandinavian countries the song is played on television every Christmas Eve in the traditional Disney Christmas show, and the gathering of the entire family for the watching of this is a major tradition. The song is about the heart, its desires, about dreaming (of something or other), about fate, and love, and secret longing –although it does not seem to be especially about the Star of Bethlehem, or about Jesus, people make the linkage nonetheless. One verse reads:

*"When you wish upon a star  
Makes no difference who you are  
Anything your heart desires  
Will come to you"*

There is a far better song that is more clearly related to the Star of Bethlehem called appropriately - "Follow the Star". One verse reads:

*"For all who seek to find new life  
Make a gift of your heart  
And follow the star  
To hear the song that heaven sings  
Like the wise men of old"*

*Come follow the star "*

## **The Star of Bethlehem**

The Star of Bethlehem is one of the most powerful symbols of Christianity, second perhaps to the Cross of the Crucifixion. The importance of the Star's role in the story of the Nativity of the Christ child is almost on a par with the birth itself.

The star is considered so important that churches have been named after it. The '*Church of Follow the Star*' is a Bethlehem Lutheran church in the United States. Lutheran Ministries believe that the baby is only the beginning of a wonderful fulfillment of God's Word. The Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus tell the rest of the story, and reinforces why that little baby's birth is so important to the foundation of the Christian faith.

Whatever the Star of Bethlehem was, it has had more impact on humankind than any star before or since. But it was not exactly unexpected. There are at least 65 verses in the bible containing the word 'star', including a number of prophecies surrounding the actual event in Bethlehem.

In the *Book of Job* Chapter 9, Job credits God with creation of the stars and the constellations, saying:

*"He is the Maker of the Bear [Ursa Major] and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south."*

And in *Job* Chapter 38, God reinforces much the same point. He, not man, is sovereign over the creation, particularly the constellations as he reminds Job:

*"Can you hold back the movements of the stars? Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations of the bear and her cubs across the heavens..."*

The *Book of Job* is one of the oldest Biblical texts, originating before or at the time of Abraham and the founding of the Jewish nation. It is quite astonishing, then, to find that this book speaks of the stars and the constellations in such detail! It states that God set them in place. And it references the same constellations that we know today.

In Psalm 19, David praises God's handiwork in the stars. But he doesn't only admire, he tells us that the stars bear a *message* - that:

*"...The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world..."*

Many other Biblical writers in other passages state that God arranged the stars. For example, the *Book of Isaiah* in Chapter 40 states:

*"Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing."*

In The *Book of Romans* (10: 17-18), Paul addressed the question: had the Jews of Christ's day heard that the Messiah was coming? He answers the question by saying that - *of course* they had heard. He then quotes David to make his point, saying:

*".... faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they [the Jews] not hear? Of course they did: Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."*

But there is one more authority who can put all of us at ease about looking up at the sky after dark – that is Jesus himself. In the *Book of Luke*, (21: 25), Jesus tells us:

*"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars..."*

Yet the *Book of Deuteronomy* cautions (4: 19):

*"..when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars - all the heavenly array - do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven."*

The Star of Bethlehem, which is also called the Christmas Star, is a star in Christian tradition that revealed the birth of Jesus to the magi, the "wise men", who were also thought to be astrologers, and later led them to Bethlehem.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the magi were men "from the east" who were inspired by the appearance of the star to travel to Jerusalem. There

they met King Herod, and asked where the king of the Jews had been born. Herod then asked his advisers where a messiah could be born. They replied - Bethlehem, a nearby village - and quoted a prophecy by Micah. While the magi were on their way to Bethlehem, the star appeared again. Following the star, which stopped above the place where Jesus was born, the magi found Jesus with his mother, paid him homage, worshipped him and gave gifts. They then returned to their "own country".

We Christians consider the star as a miraculous sign to mark the birth of the Christ, the messiah. The star fulfilled a prophecy, known as the Star Prophecy.

The "Star Prophecy" (or *Star and Scepter prophecy*) is an Old Testament Messianic reading applied by early Christians to a text from the Book of Numbers 24:17, which states:

*"I see him, but not in the present time: I perceive him, but far in the distant future: There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel...."*

The text in *Numbers* is thought of as the true source of the good news of the Star of Bethlehem in *Matthew*. And from Qumran sources, it seems another name for the messiah was - "*The Star*". The messiah is also referred to as a star in *Revelations* 2:28 and in *Second Peter* 1:19 which states:

*"Pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a light shining in a dark place - until the day Christ appears and his brilliant light shines in your hearts."*

So what might we say are the links between the readings given to us today? Matthew's story of the magi from the east who pay homage to the king of the Jews demonstrates an awareness of the prophecies in Isaiah 60 (and also in Psalm 72). These texts envisaged foreign kings bringing tributes, including gifts of gold and frankincense, to a new king in Jerusalem. It is Jesus, not Herod, who is such a king. The coming of the eastern visitors reveals Jesus as the embodiment of this calling.

From the Old Testament in Isaiah 60.1-6, the prophet speaks to the exiles who have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. God, rather than the sun worshipped in other temples, is the 'everlasting light' of Israel (vv. 19, 20). It is the Lord who will 'arise upon you'.

God's glory reflected by God's people is there for all to see - and 'nations shall come to your light'. Moses was the prophet of God and the great

servant of his people. Isaiah 40-66 announces that all Israel will now be God's messenger in proclaiming the good news, and will also be God's servant in bringing it into effect: and 'nations shall come to your light' (Isaiah 60).

Before Christmas we also heard about Micah's prophecy (5.2-5). Micah's vision was that a shepherd-king of Israel would come from an undistinguished little town in Judah. He would come from Bethlehem, where the shepherd-boy David had been anointed as the future king and had received the spirit of the Lord:

*"...O Bethlehem....a ruler will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.... and he will stand to lead his flock with the Lord's strength, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. ....for he will be highly honoured all around the world....and he will be the source of our peace."*

This prophesy is a compelling and accurate prediction of events not only in Bethlehem, but since then until the present day.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus comes to fulfil the law and the prophets (5.17). Micah's prophecy enables Jesus, born in Bethlehem, to be recognised as the true king. The other prophecy of an ideal ruler of Israel described Jesus as a star that will come from Jacob (Numbers 24.17). The star that stops where the child is born - the one who is 'greater than Solomon'.

And so we have the qualifications for the Star. It endured over a considerable period of time. The Magi saw it, perhaps from Babylon, traveled to Judea and saw it still. It went ahead of them as they traveled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was (and is) just five miles south of Jerusalem on the main road. They couldn't miss it. The Star appears ahead of them as they trekked south not so much as a guide but as a further confirmation of the signs they had seen. Lastly, the Star stopped!

So what can we say? There may be many stars – celestial and human! Our political leaders may fall over themselves to get close to human stars and celebs. To secure the all-important photo-opportunity.

But at the end of the day, there is only one Jesus – there is only one 'Star of Bethlehem'. And through His guiding Light many seek to follow.

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