

Sermon for 2 January 2022 - Epiphany

Making everyone welcome

Please read Matthew 2.1-12.

Last Sunday, Archbishop Desmond Tutu died at the age of 90, and tributes poured in from around the world. After Nelson Mandela, he was probably the most recognised face of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. He struggled for the liberation of his own people from that unjust, racist system. But in a way, that was only the beginning. Tutu continued to speak out for equality and justice for all people.

But he wasn't a politician – he was a priest. That desire for justice didn't just come out of his experience as a black South African, but from God. He knew that God had made all people to be equal. He knew that God values all people equally. And he knew that the values of Jesus, the values of the kingdom of God, were for all people.

Go back 2000 years, and who are the first people to visit Jesus, according to Matthew? Magi from the east. Who were they? We don't really know. We don't know where they came from – just 'from the east' – or how far they'd travelled. They are surrounded by mystery.

But we do know a few things. They seem to have come a long way. They are not Jewish people. And they are not Magi, or 'wise men', as our Bibles say. The Greek word is 'magoi', which means 'magicians' or 'astrologers' – and that's why they saw meaning in a star and followed it.

They are from the wrong place, the wrong race, and the wrong religion. And yet, God seems to be leading them, using this star. They come to the wrong city – Jerusalem – and the wrong king – Herod. But so that people who know the scriptures – which they don't – can point them in the right direction. Later, God speaks to them in a dream, warning them not to go back to Herod.

But before that, they come to the house where Jesus and his mother are. And they are overjoyed – they bow down, they worship, they give gifts. Whatever they do or don't understand about Jesus, whatever

place or race or religion they come from, seeing Jesus has an effect on them that it doesn't have on Herod.

So God is for all people. God speaks to all people. Jesus and his values are for all people. And sometimes we have some surprises. We might be surprised at who does respond to God – and who doesn't seem to respond.

Desmond Tutu once said, 'We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.'

But what was all this like from Mary's angle? I wonder how she felt when these strange foreigners came into the house. I wonder how she felt when they presented those strange gifts – gold, myrrh and frankincense? What was she supposed to do with them, apart from perhaps sell them?

No doubt the gifts said her baby was special in some way. But I wonder how she felt at the time. Threatened, perhaps? I wonder what she'd love to have asked them but couldn't find the words. There she sits, in silence, either petrified or mystified.

I wonder if you're a sides person, or a church warden, or a welcomer of some sort. Perhaps you're often near the church door before a service, or perhaps you just sit down and wait to see who else will come along. I wonder if there are any people you really don't want to see in church. I wonder if there are people who'd make you feel uncomfortable if they came to church. Are there people you'd find threatening?

What if a Muslim turns up out of the blue, because the night before she had a dream about Jesus? What if a refugee turns up, because he thought this would be a good place to find friends? What if someone with mental health challenges turns up, because she saw a strange star glowing over the church a couple of nights ago? What if someone transitioning from male to female turns up, because she was brought up as a Christian and has now found deeper meaning in her faith, and really wants to worship Jesus?

It's so good that so many church doors are wide open on a Sunday. It's so good that we have friendly sides people and church wardens and

other welcoming people. It's so good that so many churches are now so welcoming.

But we are not the ones to judge our own welcome. It's for those being welcomed to say how they feel. It's one thing to say 'hello' with a friendly smile and give somebody a book or a sheet. It's another thing to get to know them, to listen to their story, to discover how life is for them, and to be enriched by them.

Back in April, a Church of England Report from the Archbishop's Anti-Racism Taskforce was published – *From Lament to Action*. Just a few days earlier, an episode of Panorama investigated, *Is the Church Racist?* Perhaps you saw it. It's still available on BBC iPlayer if you didn't see it. There were some shocking cases. And just the year before, a book came out called *Ghost Ship: Institutional Racism and the Church of England*. I've been reading this over the past few weeks.

It's by a black priest, Azariah France-Williams. He shares some of his own story, interviews other people, gives us some history. It ought to be a watershed moment for the Church of England. Because it's very clear from the pages of this book that the Church of England isn't as accepting, and welcoming, and friendly, and unbiased, and equal as we'd like to think.

At the local level, we can talk about things like how we welcome people. We might remind ourselves to welcome black people as much as white people, LGBTIQ+ people as much as straight people, refugees as much as someone who's lived in our parish for years. But we only really discover if we do it well by listening to the people we've welcomed and learning from them. But that's where 'Ghost Ship' could give us a good start. I do recommend it.

The Church of England is desperate to reach out to people who don't come to church. The church is desperate to grow. And yet, we seem to manage to put lots of people off or turn them away.

And it's not just about welcome – or the initial welcome at the door. The Magi came right in and brought their gifts. And we have to welcome people by truly including them and allowing them to use their gifts. They have gifts we need, gifts we want in our churches. But above all, by using their gifts, people feel welcomed, people feel accepted, and

people grow in their faith. And everyone else grows through receiving what others can bring.

I wonder if we can do this as a church this year. Can we follow in the steps of Jesus, the Saviour and King of the whole world, who came for all people? Can we follow in the steps of Desmond Tutu, who showed us in a modern context what the values of Jesus look like, and did it so courageously and fearlessly?

Richard Wise