

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Second Sunday of Christmas**  
**January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Psalm 84  
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a  
Matthew 2:1-12

Oscar Wilde is famous for asserting taste and beauty in the face of the things that most of us consider more serious. His last words are reputed to have been a comment on the wall paper in the room he was dying in.

“This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has got to go!”

Well at the beginning of a New Year and a new Decade, we probably could do with some light relief as we consider the growing threat of conflict with Iran, the chaotic political situation here, terrorist knife attacks in London and Paris, terrible bush fires in Australia and the list goes on. Another quote from Oscar Wilde came to me as I thought about the Gospel today.

“We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.” It’s another of his famous throw away lines. Like a lot of his writing, it shows a kind of self-mocking arrogance, but, at the same time, also points to a certain profound belief about human experience.

I was too young to be true be a true child of the sixties and consequently I grew up viewing the goings on in my older brother and sister’s generation with an increasingly critical eye. All that flower power and unwashed hair, it all more or less passed me by, though I dare say, like most boys, I didn’t cut or wash my hair as much as I should have at times! I did also, to my shame, wear flared trousers and platform shoes for a bit! By the time I was going to college however, all that seemed rather passé.

Those of us caught up in the world of work and families and paying the bills are probably instinctively cynical of alternatives that involve dropping out in various forms, that often appear, in some ways at least, easier than the grind of the respectable gutter that most of us have to make our way in day in and day out. But before we congratulate ourselves on our superior grasp of reality, let us pause for a moment.

We Christians would have to agree with Oscar Wilde, wouldn't we? That being a seeker, a star gazer, is infinitely better than simply being content with the gutter. Jesus said "Seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you" He told us to be seekers, seekers after God, seekers after truth, seekers after his Kingdom. Oscar Wilde points us to an uncomfortable truth. We are all looking for something more, but we so often, either get so taken up with the day to day that it gets forgotten, or we simply lack the courage to search for it when the going gets difficult.

As long as our search leads us to nice places and an easier life we are happy to follow our star. The bright stars of peace and love were fine as long as they enabled people to indulge themselves in a wide variety of ways, and to have a good time. And it was possible as long as people had enough money from somewhere so that they didn't have to work too hard. The cynical historical view is that, when the universal claims of peace and love started to make painful demands on the hippies, they all got their hair cut and became chartered accountants and lawyers! But of course, that same criticism can also be levelled at we followers of Jesus' star. IF our following is seen to be an excuse for something else, for mere respectability, for an easy spiritual life, or for a nice little social club, then we will be subject to the same charge of having sold out, of having looked up at the star and taken a few steps after it but returned to the gutter because it is easier.

The season of Epiphany that begins tomorrow, is a story with three parts. The seeking is only the beginning. The Wise men coming from the east is the story of the honest and noble searching that all human beings are called to. It is a twofold revelation. First it is the recognition that all is not as it should be in the world or our lives. We look at the glorious chaos of life as it flows through the gutter of existence and we see so much that should be different. Some of it is our fault or the fault of other human beings, but some of it is because there are dark forces at work in the world that we cannot overcome alone. Second, it is the realization that it can be better. Partly it can be better if we strive to make it so, but the deeper realization is that we need help. We can never make it better on our own.

Our society is full of people who are part time searchers. In the midst of the bitterness and suffering and discontent of a world where the threat of war, terrorism, economic inequality and cultural conflict make people frightened, angry and disillusioned by turns, people are looking for something. The ancestors of this nation were the same. They looked at their lives and the rigid religious and economic limitations that were placed upon them, and they knew that there should be a better way.

The wise men in today's Gospel, saw a new star in the heavens, and associated it with the birth of a new and great leader that would be an agent of hope and change. They naturally assumed it must be an earthly King so they went to a King to ask the way. The directions they receive are in earnest, because Herod is just as keen to know about the coming of just such a figure as they are, but for very different reasons. Herod was a King and feared the coming of a greater one.

The wise men did not know they were looking for God, but that is what they found at the end of all their journeying. The stable was their epiphany - their moment of realisation - the moment when the meaning of their lives search and work became suddenly clear to them. And that is the second part of the story for all of us.

So many people are searching for something, some for political change, some for environmental change, some for love, some for just a better life for themselves and their families. All of them looking up and out of the gutter for a better way, following the star without really knowing what they will find. If they persevere, if they don't give in to anger and bitterness and hate, then what they will discover they are really looking for can only be found in partnership with God.

My New Year's resolution is to not knock the sixties anymore for I realise now that we must never knock any human searching that has some good in view, however flawed it might be in some ways. For that is the third part of the Epiphany story. Those of us that have had their epiphany, that have found the baby in the manger at the end of all our searching and understood who he really is, God's son. For us, the third and final act of the story is to realize that, just when we thought we had arrived, we discover that we are only beginning.

We can't look down on those who search in the dark because we now know we have not arrived yet either. And this is the important thing to let people outside the Church understand, We ARE ALL in the gutter. We, the Church, are not their destination. For, even as we lay our poor gifts at his feet, he is rising up and walking out of the stable and into the night. We cannot stay here at an empty crib for we are called to follow him through the months and years of the rest of our lives that lie ahead. Follow him in all the dirt and grime of the gutter and, before we reach the real destination, the destination God desires for all humanity, his kingdom, we must follow him also through the shadow that lies across his path in the shape of a cross.

"We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars."

Perhaps we should say at the beginning of this New Year is that all humanity is looking for the way, but some of us are trying to follow the only one who really knows which way to go. The message of the Wise Men is that human striving and searching and perseverance is essential. The message of Christmas is that, we also have to realize that God sends his son into the world because we cannot do it alone. As St Paul says “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might.” “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened”, that this should happen, is our prayer for ourselves and all humanity at the beginning of this new decade. That we should know “the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe” is our confidence and our hope. No matter how great and insuperable the forces we see around us in our lives and the world, it is God’s power in us that sends us out of the gutter and on towards the star. The Wise men set off on their journey home by a different route. There is no doubt that their lives were different from that day on just as ours are.