

8th Jan 2023 (Epiphany, Mt 2:1-12) – Life Stories #1 Balthazar’s Story: ‘Journeys & Moments’

Life, as they say, is a journey. Not a consistent one, granted: for some, very long; for others, tragically short. Sometimes smooth, mostly uneven, frequently off-piste – but a journey nonetheless. For me, my favourite journey of all time – apart from the one going home late at night up St John’s Hill right past a good kebab shop – was in the year 2000, by train from Dar-es-Salaam deep into Western Tanzania, to a town called Tabora.

There’s no better way to see the world than by train (when they’re running, obviously 😊). In a car you see motorway embankments and blue signs; on a train you see the world. And we certainly saw Tanzania. The train never exceeded 30mph, it stopped in unexpected locations for up to 45 minutes at a time, at which point a market would ‘suddenly’ materialise and locals would sell you trinkets and bracelets and, if you were really lucky, a live chicken. **It was chaotic, vibrant, slightly unnerving and incredibly beautiful.**

Much like life, in fact. That train journey in many ways felt like a living illustration of my life. I know vaguely where I’m going, but have no idea of the stops along the way, or when they will happen, or how long it will take to get to each one. I’ve no idea what will happen every time life stops, what ‘market’ will appear, who I will meet and what I will come away with. And in fact, to put it in Christian terms, although I’m sure of the end destination – that would be Heaven – what it will be like remains a mystery, a series of fleeting images lodged deep in my imagination. Like the train to Tabora, I know I’ll get there, but how, or when is beyond my comprehension.

So life is indeed a journey. But it’s not *only* a journey, is it? Life has moments, seasons, points of radical change. Psychologists and counsellors talk about liminal moments. The word liminal comes from the Latin ‘limen’ which literally means a doorframe or doorway, and by extension a threshold. So a liminal moment is a threshold into something new: a new job or home, getting married, or, more tragically, bereavement. Each such threshold leads us into a new place: much of our life may remain the same, but there is also the sense that something has changed forever.

I have had many ‘typical’ liminal moments in my life: getting married, having our two children, the death of my much-loved mother. But liminal moments are not always what you expect. Often what becomes a life-defining moment starts with something almost trivial. Take the Magi for example – the subject of our story today. They had dedicated their lives to studying the stars, trying to interpret the meaning of life and of history through what they could observe in the sky. And they had, no doubt been doing this for many years, and would continue to do so for many years after what happened in Matthew ch2.

But it was the appearance of *one* star – or as we now suspect quite possibly the two largest planets in the Solar System, Jupiter and Saturn, aligning so closely to one another in the sky that they appeared to be fused into a single point of light, something that only happens every 400 years or so – (either way, this one event) which changed their lives completely and became the moment in their life journey by which they were known for the rest of time.

The story of life is a journey; the story of life is also a series of significant moments. And what the Magi teach us is that we need to see our lives through *both* of these lenses: both committed to the long journey, and also alert to the significant moments.

As we read this famous story, we need to remember that many of the details of what we take for granted to be the Magi's story are added to the basic details we have here. We don't know exactly where they came from: all the text says is 'the East', and the best guess we can make from the culture of the time is that it was probably somewhere either in modern day Iran or Iraq. We don't know how many there were: we only assume three because there were three gifts, but there could have been just two, or more probably, quite a number. Once you add in the servants and retinue required for three wealthy travellers to make a journey of several hundred miles, the total travelling party was probably at least ten people, possibly more. We certainly don't know their names: I've called this story Balthazar's story, but the names Balthazar, Caspar and Melchior were invented about 500AD just to help make the story come alive for us.

What we do know is what we're told at the start of the text, **two very significant things: they journeyed to Jerusalem because they had seen something significant in the heavens, and they came to worship a king**. They were here on a *journey*, but it was a journey defined by a particular *moment*: the chance to meet and worship a king.

Interestingly, while the Magi are constantly moving, Herod is static. Even faced with this news, he doesn't go anywhere, other people go for him: the teachers journey to him; the Magi and then the soldiers journey to Bethlehem on his behalf. It's almost as if he presents a deliberate contrast with the Magi – a man whose life is stuck: stuck in Jerusalem, stuck in a narrative where events are overtaking him, while others journey around him. We know he was ill and tyrannical: but I think it's worth pausing to note this contrast between the Magi and Herod.

So as Herod sits and fumes, the Magi continue their journey: to Bethlehem, to Jesus, and then, of course, back home. Let's not forget that the Magi's journey does not end at Bethlehem. They leave, and go home, no doubt forever changed by their experience. This, too, is an encouragement to us. Every time we come to worship Jesus, just like the Magi, we too leave and journey on. **Having journeyed to Jesus today, when this finishes, will we continue our journey *with* Jesus this week, and this year?** As William Barclay observed, the Christian life is a continual cycle of going from the presence of people into the presence of God, and then out from the presence of God into the presence of people again. Of course, we take God's presence with us when we go back out into the world, but it's a healthy reminder that, like the Magi, our journey continues, only this time not just to Jesus, but *with* him.

Finally, as we begin this New Year, let's keep an eye out for those significant moments: it probably won't be a star in the sky which comes to shape our life journey, but the star reminds us that it could be anything. God is always at work: the trick is to spot what He's up to. As I reflected last week, thinking about the shepherds and Mary, we're much more likely to discern those significant moments if we're treasuring and pondering: taking that time to reflect and understand the journey of our lives. I can see at the moment that God is definitely changing us as a church: like all of you, I need to understand these times, and discern what this moment, this season means for us.

'We saw his star, and have come to worship him.' May God grant us grace to see, to journey and to worship this year. May God give us wisdom to spot and to seize the significant moments, and may He use them greatly for His glory. And may our journey to Jesus also be an ongoing journey with him this week, and every week. Amen.