

**Advent sermon series, 'Walk in the Light of the Lord'. Sermon 4:
'Walking for God' (4th Sunday of Advent, Year A)**

Matthew 1.18-25

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Christ Church, Chelsea

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Ponder the nativity scene. Bring it to your mind's eye. What a wonderful, settled, scene it is. Amidst the straw and animals, Mary and Joseph gaze on their newborn infant. From either side, shepherds gaze adoringly at the baby. In front of the crib, three wise men kneel in homage to the Son of God. The baby Jesus lies, peacefully, in the manger.

We know the scene from countless depictions in classical art, reproduced glossily on Christmas cards. ... But it is a snapshot that is by no means as settled as it seems. For our nativity scene brings together three groups, all strangers to one another, who have all reached this place through a journey.

First we have Mary and Joseph. It is obedience to the Roman authorities, of course – the census decreed by Emperor Augustus – that has caused them to make their long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. But their journey is also shaped by faith – a faithfulness that we might call an obedience to God. That's a faith evident in Mary's 'yes' to the angel who visits her at the annunciation, to be sure. But it is also the faith at work in the moment after Jesus's birth when, on the basis of an angel's warning to Joseph in a dream, the Holy Family flee Herod's murderous soldiers, journeying more hundreds of miles to Egypt.

On that Christmas night, however, Mary and Joseph are settled, still, beside the manger. And close to them stand the shepherds. Their journey has been far shorter, just down from the hills overlooking Bethlehem. But what a journey it has been. 'They went with haste', Luke says (Luke 2.16), but in these four words we may imagine figures almost tripping over their feet, panting with

exhilaration as they race into Bethlehem to see the good news that the heavenly host have proclaimed to them.

And then we have the wise men. What a journey they have made from eastern lands. Like Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, theirs is a journey of faith. But it is a particular kind of faith. No angel for them. Merely a star, and their God-given wisdom and learning that caused these mysterious figures to load their gifts and to leave behind all that was familiar.

Our nativity scene, of course, oversimplifies. It is a composite of two biblical stories. We have Matthew's brief tale of the birth of Jesus, which we heard as our gospel reading, and then his story of the visit of the three wise men, and of Herod's subsequent massacre of the innocents. And then we have Luke's account of the Holy Family's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, of the lack of room at the inn, and of the visit of the shepherds to the crib. But, as we ponder the mystery and enjoy the moment, no matter. In this nativity scene we have many strangers, all brought by faith to journey to an unassuming place.

Today is the last of our Advent sermon series, the last of four weeks in which we have explored what it means to 'walk in the light of the Lord'. And as we ponder today what it means to 'walk for God', surely in this nativity scene we have three groups whose journeys have indeed been for God.

We have, in the first place, Mary and Joseph. Their walking is, in our categories of the last three weeks, a 'walking together'. In Luke's account that is a very literal walking: Joseph and heavily-pregnant Mary making the long and difficult journey to Bethlehem together. In Matthew's account it is the togetherness of Joseph's standing by Mary after the astounding news from the angel, supporting his bride-to-be even as her belly swelled and the neighbours talked and tutted.

And then we have the shepherds. Their journey is, to pick up the theme of our second Advent sermon, a 'walking for others'. After the angels have left them they go straight to Bethlehem, to 'see this thing that has taken place', and to make 'known what had been told them about this child' (Luke 2.15, 17). Mary

hears their words; she ‘treasure[s]’ them and ‘ponder[s] them in her heart’ (Luke 2.19). The shepherds have heard ‘good news of great joy’, and they want not just to experience that joy themselves but also to share it with others.

Finally, there are the wise men. Our third Advent sermon describes the theme of their travels. Theirs is a ‘walking’ (or perhaps ‘riding’) ‘for creation’. It is hard, in the biblical stories, to miss an angel. Sometimes they come with four or six wings (e.g. Is 6.1-2); sometimes they appear in dazzling light (Matt 28.3); sometimes they carry a flaming sword in their hand (Gen 3.24). But a single star, amidst the many thousand of silent stars shining in the unpolluted ancient sky? The wise men have spent a lifetime learning to read the intricacies of the world around them. And this is why when they see the star they know something special is happening. Their journey is inspired by faith that there is deep meaning to creation; as they kneel at the crib, they marvel at that meaning.

Walking together. Walking for others. Walking for creation. And we may also say that – in that as theirs were acts of faith – all three groups were walking for God. For as we created beings live out our lives with our hearts, and heads, and hands, our own walking for God will often look practical, perhaps even unremarkable. The support we give to a struggling spouse, or friend. Our popping round to a neighbour to bring a smile to their face with the good news we have just heard. The sacrifices we make to steward our beautiful creation. Inspired by our prayer and worship; by a concern for God in others, God around us, God in us, these are acts of faith. These are acts of walking for God. And so how might I, how might you, walk for God this week, or in this coming year?

But, crucially, we never walk alone. As we walk for God we seek to walk, as the title of our sermon series put it, in the light of the Lord. What kind of light is this? Perhaps it is like the ‘light of the world’ that was in Mary, a kind of ‘inner light’ that guides us on our way. Perhaps that light is like the reflected glory of God that lit up the night sky for the shepherds, and left them longing to gaze on the true light that had come into the world. Perhaps that light of the Lord is

like is the single star that the Wise Men had to follow with great wisdom and care. These are not either/or-s. For it is our Christian conviction that the light of God shines on us in many ways; our life is a life of looking out for that light; of growing towards the light; of letting the light shine on us. And as that light shines on us and through us, we are helped to walk together; for others; for creation; for God. We walk in the light of the Lord.