

# **“It's still wise to follow Jesus”**

## **Carols by Candlelight: 20<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

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**Readings:** Various

### **Sermon**

What would it take to get you to change direction?

We bought a TomTom Satellite Navigation thingy last Christmas, with some money from our mothers. I was especially keen to get one because Karen is out and about in the car much more on her own these days, visiting various Churches in her role as Warden of Readers; and she hasn't in the past shown, shall we say - a strong aptitude for navigation!

I had visions of Karen being lost for hours in the depths of the south-east London Boroughs, wondering how to get home. I have to say that, as it's turned out, she has done remarkably well for someone who once had to have 'Left' and 'Right' dymo-taped on the dashboard of our first car ... and the Sat Nav has only really come into its own on holidays.

There have been some amazing stories, though, of people who have relied just a little too much on their Sat Nav's, and found themselves in serious trouble:

- There was the articulated lorry who got completely wedged in a country lane which turned out to be not quite as wide as his lorry.
- There was the taxi driver who took a sharp turn and drove down a railway track because his Sat Nav told him to.
- There have been reports of people driving into fields or woods or even rivers because they were daft enough to think that following a piece of electronic equipment meant that they could switch off their brains!

On our first visit to friends in Norfolk after they moved to a new parish, Barbara said: “Don't follow your Sat Nav into the village ... it will take you through the ford and you'll get stuck!” We followed her advice, and the TomTom did what TomTom does ... and began to tell us, as though we were naughty, disobedient children, that at the earliest opportunity we were to turn round and go back the way we had come!

Which gets me back to the matter of changing direction.

It's all the same whether it's a change of job, a house move, or new way of worshipping God ... like setting out the chairs differently for a different type of service. We are creatures of habit, and most of us find radical change a bit difficult to deal with. It is so much easier to keep going in the same, familiar way.

This evening we're thinking about the wisdom of following Jesus, and following ... whether it's *anyone* or *anything* ... involves a certain amount of trust ... especially when that means turning around and going in the opposite direction to the one in which you are going.

It's wise to be selective:

- You wouldn't take travel directions from someone who didn't know the area.
- You wouldn't follow a recipe written by someone who couldn't cook.
- You wouldn't buy a car designed even by a genius who knew nothing about mechanics

How much more, when it comes to the sort of following which shapes your whole life. Choosing to be a follower doesn't mean letting go of your common sense, after all ... it means identifying someone you trust or admire, who is worthy of your following. It's wise to check their credentials before you commit yourself.

So is it really still wise to follow Jesus?

It's a good question to ask as we draw near to celebrating his birthday. Millions of Christians all around the world are preparing to mark a moment in time when God broke in on history in a most extraordinary way, by sending his Son to earth.

We celebrate the belief that Jesus:

- was born in Bethlehem as a human baby to a virgin mother.
- lived a human life, mostly around Galilee, in which he performed extraordinary miracles.
- died an inhumane death on a Roman cross, on a rubbish tip outside Jerusalem.
- rose from the dead to be King for ever.

... and that he did this in order to save us from our sins, to call us to be his disciples, and to commission us to tell the good news to others so that they too can come to know him.

What this demands of us is a change of direction.

God calls us to turn from going our own way, and instead to go his way ... to follow Jesus as his disciples. A disciple is a learner and a follower ... someone who follows his leader because he admires him, and wants, as far as is possible, to imitate him. So a Christian disciple is someone who has chosen to follow Jesus, and to be open to God's work in his life to change him to become more e like Jesus.

So is it still wise, in this day and age, to follow Jesus?

Statistics would suggest that for most people, the answer is 'No!' Not that they've really thought about it, of course. The vast majority of people today, at least in our culture, know very little about Jesus and have no great interest in following him.

A recent survey (carried out by Theos) of a thousand people discovered that only 18% of those in the 55-64 age bracket could correctly answer a series of questions on the Christmas story, including such things as 'Where did Joseph take Mary and Jesus when he was told that Herod wanted to kill him?' or 'What was the name of Jesus' cousin?'. Amongst 18-24 year olds included in the survey, only 7% got it right.

I decided last Wednesday to try this out with the teenagers who attend the Horizon project down at TN2, so I prepared a set of twenty questions for a quiz. Great fun! It was revealing to discover that they were not at all sure about who Mary married ... they didn't know where Mary and Joseph came from ... or why they needed to go to Bethlehem ... they could not tell me who came to visit Jesus after he was born ... they had no idea where the Wise Men came from ... and no knowledge of who it was that tried to have Jesus killed.

How are people to know whether it is wise to follow Jesus, if they don't even know anything about him? ... and how are they going to find out, unless someone makes a point of telling them?

There is huge ignorance about what the Bible has to tell us about Jesus in every level of our society. Come to that, there is a surprising degree of ignorance about Jesus within the membership of many Churches.

During this service we have listened, once again, to the old, familiar readings. They tell us the story of God's unfolding plan to rescue sinful humanity from a mess of our own making, in fulfilment of the prophecies given hundreds of years before Jesus' birth.

They tell:

- of the submission of a young virgin to the will of God, to be part of his plan
- of the response of the shepherds who were told of his birth
- and of the patient searching of wise men from the east who came to see him, and on seeing him, fell on their knees in adoring worship.

So what do these 'key players' have to teach us of the wisdom of following Jesus? ... and if it was wise for them then, is it still wise for us now, to follow Jesus?

Take Mary, to begin with. Mary came, in time, to be a disciple of the man to whom she had given birth, but that was some thirty years into the future. For now, following God's plan meant answering a call to submit herself to God's purposes for her, and finding her life turned on its head.

Mary faced the possibility of becoming the focus of the rumour, gossip and scandal when her pregnancy became apparent. She faced the likelihood of the ending of her betrothal to Joseph, who, although he was a good man, would not have been much inclined to marry a woman who disgraced herself and him by becoming a single mother.

But God turned Joseph's heart and Joseph stood by her. Nevertheless, Mary's part in God's plan meant that she was uprooted from her home and her community, gave birth in less than desirable circumstances in a Bethlehem stable, and was forced into exile in Egypt because Herod wanted to kill her child.

Mary's position changed over time from mother, protector and carer ... to follower and disciple. She was to spend her life watching her son suffer, eventually to die on the cross.

There must have been many occasions when Mary longed for the more 'ordinary' life that she had been expecting. But even now, in Bethlehem, she must have wondered if all that she had been told by the angel was true:

- My child, Emmanuel?
- God come to his people?
- Can it really be?

If so, it must indeed still be wise to follow Jesus. - Mary answered the call, and so can we.

Then there were the shepherds – ordinary working men ... lowly and often ill-thought of ... often despised as unwashed, irreligious and untrustworthy. Their work kept them out of town, absent from worship, and on the very edge of society.

And yet ... and yet, they were the first to hear the good news of Jesus' birth.

The stupendous arrival of the long-awaited Messiah was announced by some of the most magnificent music the world would ever hear, to a bunch of smelly shepherds on the Bethlehem hillsides.

Those of us who are fathers might ponder that for a moment. Who was the first person you called to tell the news that your first-born had made it safely into the world? God chose to share his joy with those whom others regarded as worthless.

For the shepherds, following Jesus meant responding to an opportunity. Once they had sufficiently recovered from the shock of being the audience to heaven's choir, they hurried off down into Bethlehem to see the child whose arrival had been announced to them.

I suppose they must have had little doubt that they would be welcome, even if no-one else was keen to invite them around to supper. If God had chosen to tell them, surely it would be OK to go and see the Christ-child ... wonderfully special yet surprisingly ordinary.

God broke in not by invading Bethlehem with heavenly splendour, but by quietly allowing his Son to be born as one of us, and announcing the fact to the poor and powerless, showing us that he came for the poor and the powerless ... the outsider, and the despised.

The shepherds would tell us it is indeed still wise to follow Jesus – and not to miss the opportunity.

Finally, there were the Wise Men, or Magi, who came from the east ... mysterious men who studied the stars and believed in their meaning, drawn by the fact that God can speak their language and get their attention on what he wants them to see.

Rising to the challenge, and travelling as they did, probably from modern-day Iraq or Iran, these were men of substance. But they were Gentiles, not Jews ... pagan star-gazers!

Why would God call these men to follow Jesus? ... to make a long and perilous journey to a strange and foreign land, only to discover that the royal household was completely ignorant of a royal birth?

It was all worth it, as far as they were concerned. They discovered a different kind of King, establishing a different kind of kingdom. They recognised that Jesus was as much their ruler as anyone else' ... and his kingdom was for everyone, including them. These wise and important men found themselves kneeling in the dust, not only presenting gifts to a toddler, but offering him their worship.

The Magi would tell us that it is still wise to rise to the challenge of following Jesus, because in him we will discover more than we could have ever wished or imagined.

So what of us here tonight? Will we choose to follow Jesus?

We need to recognise that in celebrating a birth, we are not coming to worship a baby in a manger, but the man who is God. His coming as a baby in Bethlehem is all too easily lost in Christmas-card sentimentality and mush, and we need to get back to the

realities.

The reality was much harder hitting, because Jesus came to live a tough life, teaching ignorant and self-centred men what it is to know God, and how to live for him ... how to be forgiven .. and how to find eternal life.

Like Mary, will we answer the call?

Like the shepherds, will we grab the opportunity?

Like the Wise Men, will we rise to the challenge?

Following Jesus is the only way to find true fulfilment as the children of God we were created to be. John wrote:

*"In him was life, and that life was the light of men."* (John 1:4)

Apart from Jesus, we will never know what it means to live life to the full.