

Bishop Rachel's Epiphany Message

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Every year at Epiphany I am always struck afresh by those words in Matthew's Gospel that 'having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod' the visitors from the East 'left for their own country by another road' (Matthew 2:12)

I frequently referred to this in the early weeks of lockdown last year as we began thinking how we might return. Now we find ourselves returning to lockdown as well as still thinking about our return to a new normal in the months ahead.

Just as with the Magi and all involved in the events around Jesus Christ's birth, questions and uncertainty about the future pervade our lives. And just as it seems to me there is something strange about the measuring of time during this pandemic, so too I suspect there were questions around chronological time regarding the birth of the Messiah.

When the Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming Messiah and painted beautiful images of God's kingdom of hope, justice, peace, and transformation, I wonder if they had any sense of the truth that the Messiah's birth would not take place for many years to come? And as we read the different narratives in the Gospels around that first Christmas, it is hard to get a sense of time. When did the visitors from the East arrive, and how old was the baby Jesus at that stage?

What we do know is that it was a kairos moment – an opportune time to be embraced – a significant time to be recognised and responded to as the past and the future converged.

So, it is my prayer this Epiphany that as we begin a new year and another period of lockdown, looking back and continuing to wonder about the future, that even in our weariness we will continue to reflect deeply: What is it we want to carry from the present into the future and what we need to leave behind so that it is part of the past; and may we also identify what we want to bring from the past back into the future and what we might need to leave there, however painful.

In those early days of lockdown when I commented on the visitors from the East returning by a different way, I referred to TS Eliot's poem 'The Journey of the Magi'. The narrator is one of the three visitors from the East remembering the journey to Bethlehem to find the Christ Child. I quoted the final few lines of the poem in my sermon on Christmas Day in the Cathedral as I reflected on birth and death. However, the very final lines read as follows:

'We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.'

This Epiphany may we reflect on what it means for us as individuals and worshipping communities to return to the future by a different road, and may we recognise the idols from the past which we are tempted to cling on to. Amid the physical death, loss, and grief of these days, may we lift our eyes not only to the stars but to a renewed hope in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Questions, yearning, lament, and weariness will remain an authentic part of our experiences, yet may we dare to recognise what needs to die within us and around us so that new birth can emerge.

