

Little did we know a year ago what the year of 2020 had in store for us. As we wished each other a Happy New Year, none of us knew where Wuhan was or that coronavirus would spread so rapidly and have such an impact on our lives...

Freedom to shop, to travel, to visit, to hug, to sing, to meet in crowds, to earn a wage, to worship together, to play tennis, to go to school, to have our hair cut, and so much more...

Replaced with staying at home, queues, face masks, school at home, isolation, working at home, learning on line, and a whole new vocabulary of lockdown, from social distancing to bubbles, from zoom and teams to R numbers and tiers...

And there's been devastating loss - loss of jobs, of celebrations, of health and of loved ones who died away from their families.

It's painful to speak of these things and just at the moment we might feel the new year of 2021 doesn't look an awful lot better yet. What do we do with the future when everything we knew has been brought to an abrupt halt? We might well be asking: Where is God in all this? What does it all mean? And how can we say Happy New Year when it seems so far from it?

As I thought about what to share this morning, *unexpected* was the word that came to me.

Today is Epiphany, focussing on the visit of the wise men and we can be so very familiar with the story that we don't notice how much there is that was unexpected...

*The magi* themselves - rather unusual visitors being astrologers from the south of the Arabian peninsula some 1500 miles afar across the desert. They were Gentiles, yet they seemed to know that a King of the Jews had been born and had come searching for him. What a contrast to the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the faith who hadn't noticed anything new.

*Where they found Jesus* - a future king, not in a palace in Jerusalem, but in an ordinary house in Bethlehem. And we might notice that they found Jesus only because of the directions they received from Herod, a pretty evil man yet God used him to guide the magi to Jesus.

*The honour they gave to a little boy not yet 2 years old* - I guess that Mary and Joseph knew that their son was no ordinary child but I also doubt that they were expecting exotic strangers to turn up bowing, worshipping and bringing strange gifts to Jesus.

*The unexpected route home* - the magi probably doubted the sincerity of King Herod, and because they were the sort of people who took notice of dreams, they didn't hesitate to return to their homeland giving Jerusalem a wide berth.

*The next part of the story* - We might find unexpected. Not read today, in order to keep Jesus safe Mary and Joseph leave in haste and flee to Egypt. As we imagine the weeping of the mothers in Bethlehem seeing their baby sons slaughtered by Herod's soldiers we might ask how that can have been part of God's plan of love for his world?

There is a lot of *unexpected* in Epiphany.

Story 1 : tradition of taking the 3 wise men from our crib scene on a journey all around our house between Christmas and 6 Jan Idea for other families...

Yesterday put on shelf in Hilary's room. In front of scene of Applecross in Scotland.

"They've got a long way to go from the backdrop of Applecross...Unexpected laughter!

Story 2 : a true story about a woman who was returning from a hospital visit. She'd just been told that her husband had about two weeks to live - his kidneys were failing, and no treatment seemed possible. Understandably very distressed. On her journey home, she became aware of a sign, gleaming in the dark: 'Take Courage'. Somehow, she felt this was a message from God.

After she got home, she shared her story with friends from church, and a good deal of prayer was offered for the couple. Some days later, the consultant told her that, after all, her husband was well enough to receive home dialysis.

The couple went on to have many more years of life together. The thing is, both the woman and her husband were avid teetotallers - totally opposed to pubs and pub culture.

Let's take another, bigger look at the 'take courage' sign that spoke to the women - it was that of a pub!

God can and does speak to us through unexpected events and people, and in unlikely places.

2020 hasn't been all bad...good things have happened too, which were unexpected!  
In lockdown, many people noticed bird song and the beauty of nature around them, people stopped their dashing about, there was less litter, more time for families to be together..  
Despite huge economic misery, there were 2000 more companies registered in the second half of 2020 than in year before- attributed to new start ups with people having time to give their ideas a go.  
Some might even say that the pandemic has influenced the world of politics with the defeat of Donald Trump being due in no small part to his irresponsible approach to covid.  
And there has been time to reflect on the effect of humans on the resources and balance of life on planet earth...

All our wishes for 2021 are probably the same - to see an end to the death and illness, overwork and underwork, misery and isolation that Covid has let loose. But they are more than just wishes; they're a cry from our hearts to the God of all hope and the one who has promised to always be with us wherever we are. Echoing the words of a contemporary Psalm of Isolation written during Lockdown...

We don't sit alone, stand alone, walk alone, dance alone.  
We don't work alone, cook alone, drive alone, clean alone.  
We do't eat alone, sleep alone, live alone and we will not die alone.  
Immanuel, our God is with us here.

There are many journeys ahead in 2021...for each of us individually, for Rob and Philippa travelling into retirement, for our Parish as we look for a new vicar to lead us forward. Let's take heed of the story of the magi. On their journey they followed a star, a star shining in the darkness of the night. Indeed, it was only because it was dark that they could see it. Their route didn't take them where they thought they were going and what they found was not quite what they were expecting. Their journey changed them. Times for us have changed - because of the pandemic and many other factors. We cannot go back to how things used to be.  
As we leave the darkness of 2020 and set out in the uncertainty of 2021, know that the light still shines in the darkness, but be prepared for the unexpected!

God of surprises,  
Older than we can imagine, yet ever new;  
Help us to face change with courage,  
and to live without fear  
because we know that you journey with us.  
Open us to hear you speaking  
through unexpected people  
in unexpected places  
at unexpected times,  
even those we have written off.  
Enable us to embrace the unknown with joy,  
and to be the light of your love in the world of today.  
Amen.

Lesley Brown