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Happy New Year?!

It's a bit tricky to know how to start this first Together Apart email of 2021!

Life continues to change at a pace, and in a way, that I suspect few of us would have imagined back in the summer. As England goes back into almost March 2020-level lockdown, the Scottish mainland goes into 'enhanced level four restrictions' and Northern Ireland and Wales' national lockdowns continue, the sense of *de ja vu* is disconcerting.

Today's reflection focuses, as you would expect, on the Epiphany story. As I was writing it, back at the beginning of December when we were looking forward to the 'five days of Christmas' and opportunities to catch up, albeit briefly, with family and friends, this story of a light shining in the dark felt full of hope and promise.

I'll be honest: today the darkness feels a bit darker and the light not quite as bright.

However, the collect for Epiphany - which I've included in full below - reminds us 'that we, who know [God] now by faith, [will] at last behold [his] glory face to face'. As we step into 2021 with both trepidation and hope may we behold that glory in the faces of those God puts in our paths - virtually or in person - this week.

With love and prayers for 2021!

Louise, on behalf of the team at the Arthur Rank Centre

We have seen his star

Bible reading: Matthew 2:1-12

The Visit of the Wise Men

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, [g] they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

In December 2020 it was announced that the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors had been designated as 'dark sky reserves'. These two areas are 'home to some of the darkest skies in the country, with large areas of unpolluted night sky where it's possible to see thousands of stars, the Milky Way, meteors, and even the Northern Lights' (darksky.org/uk-dark-sky-reserve).

The story at the heart of Epiphany is the story of a star shining in the darkness of an unpolluted sky. Perhaps it's yet another symptom of my childhood growing up in an urban context, but I've always pictured the star at the heart of this story as a single point of light in an otherwise black sky. It only takes a quick scroll through images of the skies over the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors to demonstrate that this would certainly not have been the case! If the skies over 21st century England are dark and full of stars, how much darker and full of stars must the skies over first century Palestine have been?

Of course, the irony at the centre of the image of a brightly shining star is that the darker the darkness, the brighter the light shines. There is immense darkness at the heart of the Epiphany narrative. We know that Herod intends harm to this new-born 'King of the Jews'; just a few short verses later we read of 'the massacre of the innocents' as Herod unleashes on the most vulnerable his fury at being betrayed. We know that the gifts presented to Jesus foreshadow his death.

In fact, it's interesting to notice how much of what we recognise as 'the Christmas story' takes place at night; even when the time of day isn't explicitly mentioned the context would strongly suggest the night. The angel visits Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:20), the shepherds are watching over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8), the wise men see a star in the sky (Matt. 2:2) and are warned in dream not to return to Herod (Matt. 2:12), and Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with his family (Matt. 2:13).

And yet, from beginning to end, light radiates from the Christmas story, with its tales of angels and stars, the light shining all the brighter against the darkness. And at the heart of the story stand two encounters that aren't shrouded in darkness; the announcement of God's intervention in the world and his arrival, incarnate as a baby, are the two events that aren't associated with the night.

The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Prayer

The Collect for Epiphany (Common Worship)

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Response

Some of you will be fortunate enough to live in the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors (or other British dark sky reserves)! Why not make the most of these long dark nights and take in the extraordinary skies under which you live?

But wherever you live there are opportunities to enjoy the night sky and reflect on the contrasts of light and dark:

- Take the opportunity to reflect on the light and darkness of the Christmas story as you walk through your community at night
- Take candles – or other small lights, if this is more appropriate – round to the homes of friends and neighbours with the words of John 1:5 written on a luggage tag or card
- Put a light in your window as a visual reminder to those nearby that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

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