At the start of Epiphany, when we remember the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem, we may ask the question, 'What made the Wise Men wise?' They were wise because they had the wisdom to read the signs. These stargazers actually noticed that a new star had appeared. They were attentive to what God was doing, and made the connection with an ancient prophecy that a king would be born to the Jews. In our busy lives we do not always pay attention to what God is saying or doing and we miss the signs of his Presence. Spiritual inattentiveness robs us of our awareness of divine activity in the ordinariness of life. Wisdom says 'Slow down, look around you, see where God is at work.' We live in a God-bathed world if only we take time to notice.

The Wise men were wise because they were committed to following the truth, no matter where it led them. They were spiritual seekers, searching the heavens for a glimpse of the Transcendent. When their search led them to Judea they had the integrity to follow and to admit that the truth might be found where they didn’t expect it - among the Jews. Further, they were prepared to change their minds and adjust their beliefs to fit in with the truth. Wisdom says, ‘Follow the truth and it will bring you to God.’ Let’s have the integrity of heart that submits to the truth wherever we find it, and however inconvenient and challenging it may be.

The Wise men were wise because they asked for help. ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’ Sometimes in our search for the truth we have to admit our ignorance, and in our journey towards God we may need to ask for help. This can be a humbling thing and our unwillingness to take the place of a learner can prevent us from finding that for which we are seeking. Little children learn by asking questions, lots of them. Wisdom says, ‘Don’t be afraid to be child-like in your pursuit of God. Ask questions. Be naïve. Admit you don’t know. This way you will grow.’ If you are unsure about something, or lack understanding, find someone to ask. There is no shame in asking for help.

The Wise Men were wise because they listened to Scripture. From the priests and teachers of the law they discovered that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem, just as Micah had prophesied long ago (Micah 5:2). So what did they do? They set off for Bethlehem and began to search diligently for the Child. They rejoiced exceedingly when they arrived there and saw the star again confirming the were in the right place. Wisdom says, ‘Trust the Word of God. The Scriptures have been given as a light to our path and lamp for our feet. If you obey them you will not go wrong.’ Not all want to obey God’s Word (like Herod) and many are indifferent to it (like the priests and teachers). Those who want to obey it will often find they are swimming against the tide. How has God been speaking to you through Scripture? Take his word to heart and live by it. This is the way of wisdom.

The Wise Men were wise because they travelled together. They were friends, bound together in a common bond of spiritual hunger and enjoyment of each other’s company. This friendship helped them on the long and difficult journey and they sustained each other on their quest through mutual encouragement - Melchior (the old man?), Caspar (the middle-aged one?) and Belthazar (the youngest?). Wisdom says, ‘Look for friends who will help you on your journey with God, soul friends who share the same vision and who will help and encourage you. When you find them appreciate them and nurture the relationship for we all need companions on the way.’ There is no need to be alone as you follow God. Find friends who will travel with you; be a friend to others also.

The Wise Men were wise because they recognise The Child and worshipped him. They had expected to find the king of the Jews in a palace in Jerusalem, yet here he was in a stable in Bethlehem. Still, it was obvious to them that this little Baby was indeed the Christ. Their response was instinctive, spontaneous and real: they bowed down and worshipped him. As created beings we were made to worship God, and to ‘bow the knee’ in adoration and surrender is to take our rightful place before our Creator. Wisdom says, ‘Be aware of who you are. You were made by God, for God, and to know him. You will find your highest fulfilment and deepest joy when you give yourself wholeheartedly in worship to your Maker.’ Take time to gaze on Jesus, the Word made flesh and the One sent to save us. Let your heart be filled with love for him as you contemplate the Christ Child. This is worship.

The Wise Men were wise because they brought with them gifts which they gave to the new born King. Three gifts suggests three Wise Men and that each brought something unique expressing their own personality and yet appropriate for the occasion: gold for a King, incense for a Priest, and myrrh for a Suffering Servant. They had closely guarded these treasures until this special moment. Now they open them and one by one present their gifts to the Infant King, a costly act of worship, love and devotion. Wisdom says, ‘ Don’t be afraid to open yourself fully to God and give him the best that you have to offer - your time, your talents, your gifts, your resources … You will be blessed as you give and will become a blessing to others.’ The consumerist society in which we live tells us to get as much as we can and hold on to it; God tells us to give ourselves away in worship and service. Generous hearted and open handed people know this wisdom, that it is better to give than to receive.

The Wise Men were wise because they returned to their own country by another way. This was a smart move because it meant they could avoid meeting Herod again and being drawn into his murderous plot. It may also suggest they went back to their homeland as different people. They had been changed and transformed by the journey to Bethlehem and by their encounter with the Christ Child. Now they return in a different frame of mind to live a different way of life. Having seen a star, they will now shine like stars for the light of Christ is in them. Wisdom says, ’Be willing to let Jesus change you. Don’t be stuck in your old ways. Be flexible, be malleable, be ready for something new.’ How easy it is to get locked into familiar ways, to become rigid and unbending in our attitude, resistant to change. Wise people know what to keep from the past and how to be open to the future; to value tradition and to welcome change.