

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 3 January 2021. Epiphany

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church. Today we will celebrate Epiphany. Technically Epiphany falls on 6 January, but since that is a Wednesday...

Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14)

In the midst of unemployment, debt, illness, all the hardships of life,
why have you come to worship?

**We come because Isaiah reminds us
that no suffering or pain can separate us from God.**

I hear the Prophet calling, "Arise, shine for your light has come!"

I'm ready for that bright light from God to light my way.

We see that light in Jesus, God-with-Us,
and we recognize that light in our lives, too:

We are all created in God's image:

God's light was born in us as we breathed our first breath.

**We come to worship to connect God's light in us
to God's light in Christ,
and so illumine the world.**

What a reason to worship!

How do we recognize that light?

In compassion for all,

in justice for the poor,

in welcome for the stranger

we shine God's light into the world.

So come let us bring the joys and hardships of life to worship

and celebrate that God's light is already with us and within us.

<https://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/gods-light-within-us.html>

HYMN The First Noel, v3-6 <https://youtu.be/7pH29CKXhhc> (via www.engageworship.org)

And by the light of that same star
Three Wise men came from country far
To seek for a King was their intent
And to follow the star wherever it went
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Then entered in those Wise men three
Fell reverently upon their knee
And offered there in His presence
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the kind of Israel!

This star drew nigh to the northwest
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest
And there it did both stop and stay
Right o'er the place where Jesus lay
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord
That hath made heaven and earth of nought
And with his blood mankind has bought
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Opening Prayer

God of all time, we praise and adore you for breaking into the darkness of this world
with the glorious light of your presence.

A light which made your love for the world visible in the babe born in Bethlehem—

Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.

A light which guided those gift-bearing travellers from afar to find and worship the Christ-child.

A light which leads us to you, now revealed in Jesus Christ.

We pray that you will accept our worship for it arises from hearts and minds

in awe over the enormity of your gift to us of pure love.

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

Offering

Loving God, we offer you our gold:
The glow on the faces of children at play
The shining moments that brighten our lives.

We offer you our frankincense:
The quiet reassurance of familiar things
The grace of care and friendship
The blessing of bread and our heart's yearning in prayer.

We offer you our myrrh:
The ashes of our dreams
The bitter taste of our failures
The shadows through which we stumble.

Transform our inadequate gifts,
that they may be an acceptable sacrifice of praise,
and transform our lives to reflect more deeply your justice and joy
In the life of the world. Amen

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6
 Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon

What I love most about the passage from Isaiah is 'a multitude of camels shall cover you.' It sounds like something you might hear in an old film, in an Arab market – some kind of blessing – 'may a multitude of camels cover you!' It gives a wonderful mental image of piles of camels sitting on top of someone. I presume that in Biblical times a multitude of camels covering you would have been a great blessing as it would imply you were rich; but I think it would have been a mixed blessing as I'm sure camels are heavy and smelly, and they are said to be quite bad tempered!



This is probably more like what the passage in Isaiah is talking about – a train or caravan of camels bringing gifts from other countries. There is a lot more in these verses from Isaiah about camels than I first thought. The passage is talking about the restoration of Israel. The book of Isaiah was written as a theological reflection on the experiences of exile and restoration. And this particular passage ties in with the story from Matthew of the Magi bringing gifts from the East, in other words from Gentiles, to tell us that God is the God of all peoples, not only the Jews, and the Messiah has come to all peoples.

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 3 January 2021. Epiphany

Jerusalem is told to arise, for its light has come; the favour of the Lord again shines on them. The following verses detail the approach of various nations bearing gifts that represent the chief commodities of their respective countries. The 'young camels', or dromedaries, are known for their speed in running. They were revered by the Arabs for their speed and endurance running as far in one day as their best horses could run in nine days. Incidentally, a bit of Bible trivia for you, the word used here for young camels appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures! The young camels are from Midian and Ephah places beyond Arabia where camels were very numerous. Sheba was also in Arabia and its main commodities were gold and the incense frankincense, which is so hard to come by it is almost worth as much as gold.

So, if the wise men coming to visit the baby Jesus were familiar with the words of Isaiah they really should have brought gold, frankincense and camels, not myrrh – though of course we know that the myrrh is symbolic. Tradition implies that the wise men travelled on camels, although the Bible doesn't actually say they did. Modern tradition suggests they travelled by taxi, car and scooter, but I'm not sure that will stand the test of time! In fact, tradition implies a lot about the so-called wise men. We think there were three of them, but in fact the Bible doesn't say how many there were. It is assumed there were three because they brought three gifts, but there could have been any number of them, even a multitude. Maybe one of them even came on an elephant!

Tradition also gives them names, although in the Bible they are not named. Balthasar who allegedly was a king from Arabia, Melchior a king from Persia and Caspar a king from India. In fact, they were not kings at all. The Greek word *magos*, from which we get the word magician, means magician, astrologer or wise man, trained in astrology and dream interpretation. Greek has a completely different word for king, *basileus*, as in king Herod, so they definitely weren't kings like that. They were almost certainly of noble birth, educated, wealthy, and influential. They were philosophers, the counsellors of rulers, learned in all the wisdom of the ancient East. But why did they visit Jesus? The Syriac Infancy Gospel, a writing partly based on the Gospel of Thomas, which was not included in the New Testament, states that they were pursuing a prophecy from their prophet Zoroaster; and if they came from the East there was a good chance they were Zoroastrians. The story of the Magi may have been influenced by Persian beliefs in the rise of a star predicting the birth of a ruler and with myths describing the manifestation of a divine figure in fire and light. Whatever the exact details, the point is that they were not Jewish. And so, their journey and presentation of gifts mirrors the account in Isaiah of the restoration of Israel of many different nations bringing their finest gifts, even if the Magi did bring myrrh instead of camels!

Today we celebrate Epiphany. Traditionally this is celebrated on the 6th, and in many countries, it is a festival as big or bigger than Christmas when children receive gifts and there is special food including a 'king cake' which is really more of a fancy bread. Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning to be revealed, or manifestation, and a festival held in commemoration of the appearance of a god in a particular place, so it is the perfect word for the appearance of God in Christ at

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 3 January 2021. Epiphany

Bethlehem. What I didn't know was that the word used to apply specifically to the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, which is why it is celebrated in conjunction with the visit of the wise men – the non-Jewish visitors who came to investigate Christ's birth.

Of course, the second meaning of epiphany is a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization. I don't know if the magi had a great revelation, again the Bible doesn't tell us. It only says that they knelt down and paid Jesus homage, but they did have a revelation in a dream to not return to Herod. We don't get to hear much of what the magi actually made of the experience, whether it was worth the trip. In T S Eliot's well-known poem, *Journey of the Magi* the narrating wise man seems left with more questions than answers, though he does say he would do it all again. He says they left ill at ease, no longer comfortable with their old religion and ways, questioning the way they had always done things. And they were changed by the journey.

“...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
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.”

Maybe as we embark on a new year, we too will be full of doubts and questions, not least how fast the virus is spreading, how long we will be in Tier 4, will there be more lockdowns, when will we all be vaccinated? There were so many hopes for 2021 in the light of vaccines being approved and delivered, that seem somewhat dashed with a new variant of the virus appearing. Whether our questions are answered or not, we will be changed by the journey. We have already been changed beyond measure in 2020 and the journey continues. But we have the light of Christ to guide us, and just as the Bethlehem star arrived to guide the wise men, so it appeared again on the day I was writing this, the shortest, darkest day of the year. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

HYMN Three Kings from Persian Lands Afar sung by Alan Rickard, recorded for worship at Downing Place URC, Cambridge

1. Three Kings from Persian lands afar
To Jordan follow the pointing star:
And this the quest of the travellers three,
Where the new-born King of the Jews may
be.
Full royal gifts they bear for the King;
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.

2. The star shines out with a steadfast ray;
The kings to Bethlehem make their way,
And there in worship they bend the knee,
As Mary's child in her lap they see;
Their royal gifts they show to the King;
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 3 January 2021. Epiphany

3. Thou child of man, lo, to Bethlehem
The Kings are travelling, travel with them!
The star of mercy, the star of grace,
Shall lead thy heart to its resting place.
Gold, incense, myrrh thou canst not bring;
Offer thy heart to the infant King.

Prayers of Intercession

Bathed in starlight, we pray together to the One who created all things, saying,
Show us your child, O God,

For we observed a new star at its rising and have travelled far, bearing gifts.

Make your wisdom in its rich variety known through all faithful people,
and give your holy church grace to bear the gifts of truth and love to all your children on earth.

Show us your child, O God,

For we walk together in faith.

Give your justice to the nations and their leaders,
and give your mercy to all whose decisions
affect the peace and well-being of the world.
Where we have power ourselves,
open our ears to the cries of the weak, the poor, and the needy,
and open our hearts to answer their call.

Show us your child, O God,

For we walk together in hope.

Bless this community, that in your light we may each become a servant, one to the other.

Bring us together in story, song, joy, and sorrow;

and let every daughter and son who comes among us find kinship in this place.

Show us your child, O God,

For we walk together in love.

Have mercy on those among us
who journey in sickness, fear, or any kind of trouble.
Meet them on your road with rest, peace, and good cheer.

Show us your child, O God,

For we walk together by your side.

We remember those who have died.

Your star goes before them. Show them your child, O God,

For they have travelled far to be with you.

Dear God, with longing and thanksgiving,
knowing that you hold this world and all its children dear in your heart,
we pray this night for the grace to receive your gifts, to lift up our eyes and look around,
and to offer back those same gifts to you and your world, with love.

Show us your child, O God,

For we observed a new star at its rising and have travelled far, bearing gifts.

To the One who is the road on which we travel, our companion along the way, and our journey's
end, we pray in boldness and confidence through faith in Christ Jesus, **Amen.**

written by Margaret D. McGee

Lord's Prayer

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 3 January 2021. Epiphany

HYMN Angels from the realms of glory (R&S 324) recorded by Thora

1 Angels from the realms of glory,
wing your flight through all the earth;
heralds of creation's story
now proclaim Messiah's birth!

*Come and worship
Christ, the new-born king;
come and worship,
worship Christ the new-born king.*

2 Shepherds in the fields abiding,
watching by your flocks at night,
God with us is now residing:
see, there shines the infant light:

3 Wise men, leave your contemplations;
brighter visions shine afar;
seek the great Desire of nations,
you have seen his natal star:

4 All creation, join in praising
God the Father, Spirit, Son,
evermore your voices raising
to the eternal Three in One:

Blessing

Star child, wanted and welcomed by the humble,
hated and hounded by power-seekers:
refuge and refugee, we love you!

Apple of God's eye, cherished and chosen by Kingdom-travellers,
rejected and ridiculed by the earth bound:
sacred and scarred, we honour you!

Light of the world, tended and treasured by the pure in heart,
shadowed and shunned by the deceitful:
peerless and pierced, we exalt you!

A World of Blessing ed. Geoff Duncan

And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen