

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 9 Jan. 2022. Written service circulated to all

We listen to Three Kings from Persian Lands Afar. Sung by Alan Rickard of Downing Place URC.
Used with permission

Call to worship (based on Psalm 29)

We come to worship our God, and to celebrate the
Mystery and Reality that is God's everlasting glory.
The voice of God is heard in all creation – and it responds
with joy to the voice of its Creator, Sustainer and Renewer.
We come to worship our God, and to celebrate God's
power and generosity towards all creation and all peoples.
We come to worship our God, and to celebrate the
way we are welcomed into God's glorious presence.
The voice of our Holy God is heard in the sacred
spaces, and God's grace is received as we worship.
May God give strength to the people!
May God bless God's people with peace!

Hymn Brightest and best MP 65 / R&S 183

Opening Prayer from the URC Prayer Handbook 2022 p7

Prayer of Confession

God, we live our lives as best we can -
dealing with difficult relationships and situations,
putting failures and disappointments behind us,
and moving into each new day with as much energy,
goodwill, and optimism as we can muster.
But here, right now, we seldom have the right answers,
we seldom seek your higher wisdom in our lives, we just move ahead.
Forgive us for not asking for your insight.
Fill us with your wisdom, that we may live lives of goodness and peace. Amen.

Words of Assurance

When we come before God in humility and honesty,
God draws near to us with forgiveness and renewed blessing.
Thanks be to God!

~ Adapted from *The Abingdon Worship Annual 2009*, © 2008 Abingdon Press.

Offertory

In the season of Epiphany we remember the gifts brought to our Lord as an infant.
Holy One, to whom were given the gifts of power and prayer, and the gift of suffering,
help us to use these same gifts in your way and in your name. **Amen.**

**Bible readings: Isaiah 43:1-7
Matthew 2:1-12**

I've done a bit of a mix and match with the lectionary today! We have the psalm (our call to worship was based on Psalm 29) and Old Testament reading set for today when the church traditionally remembers the baptism of Jesus, but the gospel reading is from Epiphany, which was on Thursday, the 6th. I rather like Epiphany, when we remember the arrival of the Magi (three wise men) to Jesus, though we don't celebrate it with much gusto here. In other

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countries children receive gifts on the 6th instead of at Christmas, and in many countries there are parades and special food. Here it is just the day by which you must take down your Christmas decorations to avoid bad luck! But let's look a little closer at the story of the Three Kings.

For a start, we do not know that there were only three of them, as Matthew doesn't tell us, there could have been more. And they were not kings. The tradition that the magi were kings has grown out of interpretation of Scripture, such as the Old Testament lectionary readings set for Epiphany. Isaiah 60 speaks of Gentile nations being drawn to the light of Israel, and 'kings' to the brightness of its dawn. Psalm 72 also speaks of Gentile kings bringing gifts and bowing down before the king of Israel. What we do know is that they were not Jewish chief priests or scribes, the people Herod first consulted, but they were Gentiles, they were outsiders, strangers. This follows the theme of the shepherds being the first to hear the good news of Jesus birth – the Messiah came to draw in outsiders. His birth was not announced in the halls of fame, but on a cold hillside to people on the edges of civil society. It was not the puppet king of the Roman Empire who interpreted a new star rising, but foreigners from the East, and yet king Herod was afraid.

Herod was well-known in the ancient world for both his paranoia and his brutality.

Apparently, he had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him. Matthew's depiction of Herod fits very well with this picture of a paranoid and brutal leader. Matthew tells us that when Herod heard of a baby born to be king of the Jews, he was frightened and began plotting to do away with him. And it is not surprising that when Herod was troubled and afraid, all Jerusalem was troubled along with him. We all know that when populist leaders get nervous, they do strange and often terrible things to the people they govern – think of Assad in Syrian, of Trump, of Putin in Russia, and many leaders throughout history. Even our own Prime Minister surrounds himself with 'yes-men', rather than people best suited to ministerial roles. And Herod followed through with his plotting - slaughtering all the infant boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to get rid of his perceived rival. For Herod, and for all who plot evil in dark corners, the bright star of Jesus' birth is not good news. It illuminates a world much larger than Herod imagined, a world in which he is not in control. And paranoid leaders hate not being in control.

Despite our traditions, the fact remains that Matthew doesn't say they were kings and doesn't tell us how many there were. The magi were most likely astrologers, perhaps Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest faiths, believing, like us, in one transcendent, all-good, and uncreated supreme creator deity. And they were definitely Gentiles; they came from outside of Israel, and they did not know the Scriptures.

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But they do know how to read the stars. God reaches out to them and leads them by means of something they understand. In the ancient world, stars and other signs in the heavens were thought to signal important events. And it is known that around the time of Jesus' birth there was a rare alignment of planets which would have looked like a big new star. The bright star rising leads them to discern that a royal birth has occurred in Judea. So, they come bringing gifts fit for royalty – gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Gold we all know is a gift fit for a king. We think we know about frankincense and myrrh, but do we really? Both frankincense and myrrh come from the resins of trees. They both have wonderful fragrances when burned and both have long been used in perfumes and in the making of incense for worship. Frankincense has been traded for over 5000 years and used for church incense. It was at one time more highly valued than gold. You may remember a few years ago, in her programme about the Silk Road, Joanna Lumley talking about frankincense, and it turns out that she is supporting a current campaign to save a frankincense forest in Ethiopia. It also has many medicinal and health benefits. Myrrh has some very distinctive properties. The name means “bitter” in Arabic. Its yellowish-white resin seeps from the trunk of a small desert tree when wounded and hardens into teardrop shapes, as though the tree itself were weeping. Once exposed to the air, its colour deepens into gold, then amber, and then scarlet—like drops of blood against the bark of the trees. The resin is bitter to taste, but when ground into a powder or burned as incense, it releases an extraordinary fragrance. Myrrh has long been used for its medicinal qualities as an antiseptic or analgesic agent. According to Mark, Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh at his crucifixion (Mark 15:23). In the ancient world, myrrh was also a common agent used for embalming the dead, and according to John's Gospel, it was used at Jesus' burial (John 19:39). As such, myrrh seems a gift more suited for the end of life than its beginning.

Yet it seems that the magi were indeed wise in their gift-giving. Their gift foreshadows what is to come. Myrrh is a bittersweet gift, but it is a fitting gift for King Jesus born into the world of King Herod, for an infant king born into a world where evil tyrants plot the deaths of innocents, as sadly they still do today. It is a fitting gift for this humble king who will be put to death as a threat against the empire. It is a fitting gift for the shepherd-king who comes to lay down his life for the sheep. At the beginning of a new year, when we are filled with hope and optimism, especially if we don't listen to the news too much, perhaps we would rather not be reminded, of the gift of myrrh that reminds us that Jesus' birth, like every birth, begins a journey toward death. This infant king is born to die - for our sake. At the same time, the healing properties of myrrh remind us that in Jesus' death and victory over the grave, there is healing for all our ills. And that is always true, at the start of the year and

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every other day – Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, means we are surrounded by God’s love and care every day.

Hymn We Three Kings MP 740

Lord’s Supper

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God’s Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations, and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us, to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,

and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,

and we may be ready to live for you

and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

God of wonder and mystery,
God of the stars and the universe,
God of winding ways and straight paths,
we gather today with gratitude
for the gift of your constant presence,
your trustworthy guidance,
and your daring risk-taking with us.
You dare to love us despite our inability to respond fully.
You dare to care for us, despite our challenge in caring for others.
You dare to walk with us, despite our fickleness.

On our own journeys
toward the guiding points you put before us,
you continue to lead us forward,
guiding us by the teachings of Jesus
to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow.

As we struggle with the political wrangling of this world,
the wars waged for both justice and greed,
the violence committed daily against the innocent,
let alone the pain of broken relationships and loss,
you remain steadfast in your care and devotion
for your entire creation throughout the universe.
It is almost too much to take in sometimes.
And even in our doubts and disbelief,
our struggle to understand and constant misunderstanding,
and our ignorance about your ways,
you remain constantly present to us.

We pray for peace in this world, Lord,
the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity,
are joyfully challenged by adversity,
and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere.
We pray for those who are lonely,
that you might lead us to reach out and be friends.
We pray for those who are hungry,
that you might lead us to offer sustenance.
We pray for those who are lost,
that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

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We pray for the countries of the world,
that we might find a way to work together to lift one another up,
and find solutions to the climate crisis.

We pray for our political leaders,
that your Spirit might guide them
to set an example for our country and the world
to work together rather than against one another.

We pray for the United Reformed Church in its 50th year,
that we may seek to build up and renew.

We pray for our church leaders,
that they may continually seek your Spirit
in their lives and their daily decisions.

And we pray for ourselves,
that we might continue on this Epiphany journey,
learning the lessons you offer,
seeking the fullness of your perfection,
and live as you would have us live.
These prayers and hopes we offer
in confidence and gratitude of your love and presence. Amen

written by Rev. Eric Ledermann, amended

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Who would think that what was needed R&S 178

Epiphany Blessing

Go in peace, and may the God who protected the Holy Child
cover you and keep you,
the God who came to be with us, be found beside you
and the love within you be called into safety by the gentle Holy Spirit. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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