

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 8 Jan. 2023

Call to worship (based on Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14)

O God our Guide and Helper, we come to worship you!
You stay beside us as we journey through life.
O God our Just and Holy One, we come to thank you!
You lead us in your path of justice and peace.
O God, our Trustworthy Leader, we come to praise you!
We know we can always rely on your promises.
O God, we gather to worship, praise and thank you. Amen.

Hymn Worship the Lord in the beauty R&S 187

Offering

Opening Prayer

In the midst of wars, climate crisis, debt, illness, all the hardships of life,
why have we 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.

Ask for joys and hardships – pray for them

Hymn As with gladness men of old R&S 184 / MP39

Bible readings: **Isaiah 60:1-6**
 Matthew 2:1-12

Extract from The Journey of the Magi, T.S. Eliot

I didn't think I was going to talk about camels, but the phrase from Isaiah – a multitude of camels shall cover you – tickled me and provides some great mental images of piles of camels sitting on top of you. 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. **PIC** The picture on the card I gave out to you, is more what the passage in Isaiah is talking about – a train or caravan of camels bringing gifts from other countries. It seems there is a lot more in these verses about camels than I first thought. This passage of Isaiah is talking about the restoration of Israel. The book of Isaiah was written as a theological reflection on the experiences of exile and restoration. This particular passage ties in with the story from Matthew of the Magi bringing gifts from the East, in

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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.

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 9 days. Incidentally, a bit of Bible trivia for you, the word used here for young camels appears nowhere else in the Bible! 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 had read their Isaiah, they really should have brought gold, frankincense and camels, not myrrh. Tradition implies that they 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.

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 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 advisors of rulers, learned in all the wisdom of the ancient East. But why did they visit Jesus? The Syriac Infancy Gospel 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 are celebrating the feast of Epiphany, though technically it is on the 6th of January. The Day of the Kings is celebrated much more by Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians. In Spain, Portugal and many Latin American countries, 6th of January is celebrated as a big festival, in most it is a public holiday, and in some children receive their gifts on this day rather than at Christmas. Other popular traditions include eating Kings Cake, singing, and winter swimming. It sometimes seems that all we've been left with is the superstition of making sure the decorations are down by

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12th night, and sermons about epiphanies we might have at the start of a new year, quite often about good intentions and more healthy life styles. Up until the 19th century, even in this country, Epiphany was more important than Christmas Day, and it was used to celebrate both the three kings' visit to Jesus and Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The Orthodox church still celebrates both these events on the same day. And today's lectionary reading is the Baptism of Jesus. Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning to be revealed, 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 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 his birth. 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 know what the magi made of it all, whether it was worth the trip. In T S Elliot's well-known poem, The 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. But he also says that 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. Maybe as we embark on a new year we too will be full of doubts and questions, but whether they are answered or not, we will be changed by the journey. As much as we sometimes like to look back, we can only move forward.

Read extract from Caspar - Walking Backwards to Christmas.

Hymn Brightest and best R&S 183 /MP 65

LORD'S SUPPER

We have heard of your grace, Shaper of stars;
from those set free from injustice; from our children who whisper of your joy;
from greeters of dawn's fresh start; from late risers who listen to the stories of the needy.
We have heard of your Light, Bright Star of the morning:
which can illumine the shadows of our lives; which can show
the path to God's heart; which can point the way to where we become servants of the gospel.
We have heard of your promised peace, Wisdom's Radiance: that peace which can end war,
as well as heal our hearts; that peace which can conquer our fears,
and flood us with faith; that peace which can enter our lives and overwhelm us with hope.
We have heard of you, God in Community, Holy Three in One, and will proclaim your glory to all.
As we start a new year, a time of new beginnings, perhaps of resolutions or promises to do
and be better, we come to your table, to accept your forgiveness and grace, knowing that we can do
nothing without it.

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.**

Lord God, 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

Radiant God, light for all people and all places, by the guidance of a star you led the Magi to
worship the Christ child. By the light of faith lead us to worship you in peace and love, and guide us
in your way.

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Beckoning God, who called the rich to travel toward poverty, the wise to embrace your folly, the powerful to know their own frailty;
who gave to strangers a sense of homecoming in an alien land
and to stargazers true light and vision as they bowed to earth –
we lay ourselves open to your signs for us.

Stir us up with holy discontent over a world which gives its gifts to those
who have plenty already, whose talents are obvious, whose power is recognised;
and help us both to share our resources with those who have little
and to receive with humility the gifts they bring to us.

Rise within us, like a star, and make us restless until we journey forth to seek our rest in you. We pray in the name of Christ, light of the world.

The Lord delivers the needy when they call; the poor and those who have no helper.

The Lord has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves their lives.

Lord, grant to the rulers and leaders of the world that they may rule and judge with justice and righteousness, that they may defend the cause of the poor, deliver the needy and crush oppressors.

The Lord our God cares for all oppressed people.

We pray for peoples of this earth who suffer under the rule of unjust regimes and governments. Just and Honourable God, your nature and your ways proclaim you to be the compassionate God of all people. We pray for people who know the horror of oppression, imprisonment without cause, and the loss of freedom to act or worship you as they choose.

The Lord our God cares for all bewildered people.

God of grace and love, we seek your merciful help for people who struggle with poverty, hunger, and diseases that can be cured with modern medicine, and for all children who are deprived of the basic necessities of life. We pray for aid agencies who serve suffering humanity in challenging circumstances.

The Lord our God cares for all defenceless people.

God of peace, may the light of your endless peace shine on all vulnerable people. Bring peace with justice, and a hope that is realised in the hearts, and minds of all your people. We pray for the people of Bethlehem, surrounded by a wall on all sides, their livelihoods destroyed, separated from family members. We pray for all Christians persecuted and abused for their faith. And we pray for travellers, like the Magi, those who have to make long journeys to find peace and security.

The Lord our God cares for all vulnerable people.

God of comfort and compassion, bring relief and peace to those who are ill, to those who care for them and for all medical staff who help them. Comfort the bereaved and those missing loved ones. The Lord our God delivers all those in need, for they are precious in his sight.

Lord, as you guided the Wise Men to the Christ child, guide us on your path of justice and righteousness, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn We Three Kings MP740

Blessing

May the Lord bless you with all good and keep you from evil;
May God give light to your heart with loving wisdom
and be gracious to you with eternal kindness;
May God lift up his loving countenance upon you for eternal peace. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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