

## **Sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025 – Year C – Feast of Epiphany**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

### **Sermon**

And so, at last, the three wise men arrive at the stable in Bethlehem to offer their most precious of gifts to the baby Jesus. The story of the wise men, or kings, or magi if you prefer, is an odd one. Luke's gospel has angels and shepherds, but no wise men, and no Herod murdering Bethlehem's children to remove the threat of a usurper. Matthew on the other hand has wise men and wicked old Herod, but no shepherds or stable, or manger. Christians have always merged these two gospel-stories together, but if we were lacking the gospels of either Luke or Matthew, the Christmas story would look very different indeed!

But let's deal with the classic questions first: Were these wise men, or kings, or both? The text only says that they're magi, which refers to astrologers - those who look to the stars for guidance. The centre of astrology and astronomy was Babylon at the time, so it's likely that these wise men came from the centre of the very empire which had once conquered Jerusalem and to where the Jews had been exiled a few centuries earlier.

Immediately there's a powerful reversal going on. The empire that once humiliated and destroyed the Jewish nation is now represented as coming in humility to offer tribute to the new Jewish king. Early Christians saw this as a fulfilment of prophecy, which is why in the Isaiah reading set for today we read: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. The wealth of the nations shall come to you. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." And Psalm 72 (also set for today) says "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles

render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.”

With all this mention of kings paying homage and gifts, it's little wonder that the magi were soon thought of as kings themselves.

Early commentators, wanting to emphasize the universal inclusiveness of Jesus' mission, imagined the magi with specific appearances to represent different races and ages. Those of you who participate in our livestreamed morning prayers will know that I have a special fondness for the Northumbrian monk and historian the Venerable Bede, and yes it was Bede himself who apparently gave the three wise men their names and appearances. In an 8<sup>th</sup> century treatise attributed to Bede, “Melchior” was described as “an old man with white hair and a long beard,” (much like Bede himself), “Gaspar” as “young and beardless and ruddy complexioned,” and “Balthasar” as “black-skinned and heavily bearded.” And thus, the whole earth in all the diversity Bede could imagine is represented by these three individuals coming together to worship Jesus.

The gifts, too, have been given particular meaning by Christian theologians. Gold represents Jesus' kingship, while the frankincense acknowledges his divinity. Myrrh on the other hand was both an ingredient of the holy oil that anointed chief priests and kings (including King Charles at his Coronation), and it was also used in the wrapping of Jesus' body after his death. In other words, these gifts were the standard ones you'd present to a king, but they can also be said to foreshadow the role that Jesus comes to embody: his kingship, his humanity, his divinity, and his death.

But is that everything there is to the story? Leaders from an old oppressor and representing the whole world, come to hail Jesus as the Messiah and bow down before him, with Matthew presumably wanting to encourage his Jewish Christian audience to feel good both about their Jewish heritage and their choice to follow Jesus.

Those of us without Jewish heritage might see ourselves more in the magi, following something in our hearts and minds that draws us to Jesus for reasons we perhaps cannot explain. At some point in our lives, we each saw a star that intrigued us, and made us want to follow it and set other goals aside.

Fifteen years ago, I had an epiphany that maybe there was more to life than earning as much money as possible. Thirteen years ago, I had an epiphany that perhaps I was being called to ordination as a priest in the church. Ten years ago, I set aside my other work and began my training for ministry. Six years ago, I was ordained and began my ministry as a curate on the North Coast of Cornwall. One year ago, Jane and I moved house from Kent to Glasgow, to take up this post serving in the East End. Each one of these changes meant giving up something in order to embrace something else more precious.

This is why we call this feast day The Epiphany – a Greek word meaning revelation or manifestation, literally ‘light all around.’ In Jesus, God’s glory is suddenly revealed, our attention is caught, and our life is changed.

Often I find that the transformative effect of this revelation is greater the more of an outsider we had previously been. The wise men presumably knew little of Jewish religion, but they came to understand the truth of Jesus better than most of the people of Jerusalem, even those who had been searching the scriptures all their lives.

Sometimes, it is only when we kneel humbly in the dust and cold of a stable in a backwater village, that we recognise with astonishment that this is actually where God prefers to make an entrance.

Most of us first assume we must head to glorious Jerusalem to find the true yearning of our heart, but later we discover that love is most often to be found in the humblest of places among the humblest of people.

Like the magi, we must also recognise that the gifts we bring can never match the value of the gift that God has given us in Jesus. Similarly, the gifts that Jane and I have brought as priests here in your community will always pale in comparison to the gifts and blessings we have received from you. However majestic the gifts we each bring, they are not nearly so important as the people we encounter, and the relationships and friendships we are drawn into.

And so, I think the most important question is not the meaning of the gifts the wise men bring to Jesus, but what they receive *from* him, the new wisdom they take back to their homes, families, friends, and neighbours. As with all the reversal stories in the gospels, God challenges the assumptions and privileges of the powerful and wise, while the spiritual longing and thirst of the humble is satisfied.

You will no doubt have noticed that in the gospel story, the wise men go home by a different way, not just literally to avoid Herod, but metaphorically, because they have been changed. We too are changed by our experience here in this place. Throughout the year, this church is a giant crib where we kneel in worship, are transformed, healed, and loved, and sent out to share Christ's light with others.

The magi's journey from foreign lands to the manger reveals God's intention to welcome everyone into the joy of God's family. And in kneeling humbly in the cold before Jesus, in choosing *that* journey each day rather than any other, we become the ones through whom God's kindness and love shine forth, and God comes to make his home with us.

This week marks the first anniversary of the journey that Jane and I took to come here to Glasgow. It has been an honour and an immense joy, to spend this first year with you, to kneel before Jesus alongside you all, and worship our God of love together.