

Christ Church, Ipswich

Sunday 3rd January 2021

Epiphany Sunday Worship with Holy Communion

with Revd Neil Coulson

Happy New Year to you and your loved ones! I hope you are well. Today is Epiphany Sunday and so there'll be no surprises regarding our readings this Sunday! Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12 will feature within our service and other possible readings for this Sunday would be Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 and Ephesians 3:1-12. We begin this new year with an opportunity to celebrate Holy Communion together. If you'd like to participate, may I encourage you to prepare some bread and wine (or something as similar as possible) ready for this part of our worship. Let us worship God together:

Call to worship

A new year has begun.
Let us leave behind all that is past,
and walk together into the future.
Let us trust in the God of new beginnings,
and worship the God of fresh hopes.

A prayer of approach

Glorious Lord, we your sons and daughters
come into your kingly presence.
We lift our eyes to you, seeking your guiding light
and offering up our gifts of worship and praise.
Amen.

Hymn Immortal, invisible, God only wise (R&S 67)

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish; but naught changeth Thee.

Great Father of glory: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.
And so let thy glory, Almighty, impart,
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

Walter Chalmers Smith. (1824-1908)

Prayers of confession and praise

Lord, just as the wise men set out into new territory in search of you,
 help us to step out of life's narrow tramlines.
 Forgive us for seeking you out only in areas we know and in which we are comfortable.
 In their day, the wise men were outsiders, yet were guided by a star and spoken to in a dream;
 their steps directed for your purpose.
 Forgive us when we fail to see – or even dismiss – your leading from unexpected places
 and unlikely people.
 Lord, forgive us.
 Widen our vision and expand our minds
 to search and discern you in all places and people,
 that we may be drawn closer to you. **Amen.**

*Deeply thankful for God's amazing grace and mercy in our lives,
 we bring before him our prayers of praise and thanksgiving:*

Lord, we thank you that you want to speak to us,
 and use so many ways to do so –
 some of which can be so completely unexpected
 that we don't look for them.
 Thank you for what we will explore and learn today.
 We cannot expect the unexpected,
 but help us to be open to the possibility!
 Help us to look out for people and situations
 through which you speak to us.
 Help us to know what you are calling us
 to be and to do in your name.
 And help us to act,
 to make our faith an everyday faith
 in which your will is done,
 and your kingdom comes among us. **Amen.**

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)

The ingathering of the dispersed

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
 and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
²For darkness shall cover the earth,
 and thick darkness the peoples;
 but the Lord will arise upon you,
 and his glory will appear over you.
³Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴Lift up your eyes and look around;
 they all gather together, they come to you;
 your sons shall come from far away,
 and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;
 your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]
 because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
 the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,
 the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
 all those from Sheba shall come.
 They shall bring gold and frankincense,
 and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Gospel Reading**Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)***The Visit of the Wise Men*

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

The story of the wise men coming from the east to bring gifts to the infant Jesus is associated in the minds of most people with Christmas. It is usually part of the nativity scene and most years, it is wonderfully enacted in churches, schools and nurseries everywhere, including in our own church sometimes! However, this story, with its strong connections with the Hebrew Bible and its prominent depiction of these non-Jewish worshippers, fits more appropriately with the celebration of Epiphany. It announces to the reader of Matthew's story that the gospel is to travel way beyond Jewish boundaries and it offers a reminder of the worldwide mission of the church.

Today, we will focus on just some of the primary characters in Matthew's story, namely, the wise men themselves. The Greek term '*magoi*' suggests that the 'wise men' were priestly sages from Persia who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. What distinguishes them in the story is their sincere and persistent search for the baby 'born king of the Jews'. Now, whilst we might think of them as being veteran, sophisticated travellers, one thing that's quite striking about them is their openness and honesty. They are almost naïve, aren't they? They seem to anticipate no difficulty at all in inquiring of Herod the King about the birth of a rival king! Their inquisitiveness forces a troubled Herod to seek help from the chief priests and scribes, who, although they're closely aligned with Herod, ironically produce the decisive clue that finally leads to Bethlehem.

Throughout their journeys, the wise men are clearly guided by God. It is first a star in the East and then a text found in Micah that leads them to their goal. And then, when the time comes for them to leave Bethlehem, they are warned in a dream to take a different route home to avoid Herod. These strange outsiders do not stumble upon the Messiah as if by accident. They search with purpose and are directed each step of the way by a divine hand. Their stay in Bethlehem is marked by great joy, by the worship of the infant Jesus and by the giving of gifts. We notice that they come prepared and that they seem to know what to do when they arrive. The story is very specific about the gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh - all expensive gifts suitable for royalty. We are not given any clues about the motivations of the Magi, why they came and why they worshipped. The storyteller only seems interested in the response they made, the proper response to the King of Israel.

Now the remarkable fact that undergirds this entire picture of the wise men, their searching, their guidance, their worship, is the way it's presented as the fulfilment of scripture. Isaiah 60:1–6 and Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, both Epiphany readings, speak of the time of restoration when *'the wealth of the nations shall come to you. . .they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.* (Isa. 60:5-6). The arrival of the non-Jews at Bethlehem turns out to be part of the divine plan, a fulfilment of promises made long ago. The wise men, as representatives of all non-Jews, belong here in the company of those worshipping the infant Messiah. And if we think about it for a moment, there's also a profound sense that, they pave the way for the command the risen Christ gives to the Eleven at the end of Matthew's 'Jesus' story: 'make disciples of all the nations.'

As we see Hebrew Scriptures fulfilled in Matthew's story, we note how Matthew's story is actually full of quotations from and allusions to the Jewish Scriptures: The wise men follow the star of Numbers 24:17, 'a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' - this is a messianic star, the Star of David. Where will they find this new-born king? In Bethlehem, according to Micah 5:2. When they get there, what gifts will they offer? Gold and frankincense, according to Isaiah 60. The parents' later flight to Egypt in the next few verses has a connection with Hosea 11:1. It is possible that Matthew's story has been created imaginatively out of these passages. But whatever its historical veracity, as I mentioned last year, the story does not need to be factually true to be beautifully true:

This is a beautiful story that we tell about the reality of God's appearance, the reality of God's presence, through this most unlikely of kings: a child of modest parents, in a modest house that is the new temple outside Jerusalem, with a sanctuary from which no one is excluded. This is a beautiful story that we tell because in Matthew's story there is a story about who Jesus is: the promised Messiah, the king worshipped by kings, the fulfiller of prophecies, the light coming into the world that shines in the darkness and draws the gentile wise men by its brightness. And in their drawing close to God is all of us, we are all welcomed, we are all included; if they're in, we're in, literally... everybody is in! Amen.

Hymn As with gladness men of old (R&S 184)

As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold,
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright,
so, most gracious Lord, may we
evermore be led by thee.

As with joyful steps they sped,
Saviour, to thy lowly bed,
there to bend the knee before
thee whom heaven and earth adore,
so may we with willing feet
ever seek thy mercy-seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
at thy cradle rude and bare,
so may we with holy joy,
pure, and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to thee, our heavenly King.

Holy Jesus, every day
keep us in the narrow way;
and, when earthly things are past,
bring our ransomed souls at last
where they need no star to guide,
where no clouds thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright
 need they no created light;
 thou its light, its joy, its crown,
 thou its sun, which goes not down.
 There forever may we sing
 alleluias to our King.

W. C. Dix. (1837-98)

Holy Communion

Words of Invitation

Look, here is the Lord's Table spread as for a feast.
 Bread for breaking, wine poured for drinking:
 signs of his love and hospitality,
 symbols of his life broken, his blood poured out.

He is not dead!
 He is risen and present among us,
 evidence of God's covenant grace and promise.

So we come in faith to the table, you and I,
 companions on the journey.
 Some of us fresh and eager,
 others weary, in need of nourishment.
 All of us conscious of our failings.

*Almighty God,
 to whom all hearts are open,
 all desires known,
 and from whom no secrets are hidden:
 cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
 by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
 that we may perfectly love you,
 and worthily magnify your holy name;
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Come now, don't hesitate,
 the feast is ready
 and the Lord himself invites you.

We Remember

It was the night of the Passover, and Jesus and his friends were sharing supper together.
 While they eating, he told them that one of them would betray him.
 They were appalled and protested saying 'Not I Lord, I would never betray you.'
 Jesus took some bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying
 'Take this and eat. This is my body.'
 He took the cup of wine and after giving thanks passed it among them saying as they drank
 'this is my blood of the covenant. It is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. I will
 not drink again until the day comes when I drink with you in my father's Kingdom.'

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Creating and redeeming God,
 we give you thanks and praise
 for your covenant of grace:
 a covenant expressed in sinful people
 who know forgiveness,
 the weary who are refreshed,
 the hungry who are nourished,
 the captives who are set free
 and the oppressed who experience liberation.
 Thank you that you chose to make us a part of your story.

Thank you for Jesus Christ
 who revealed your love in his death and resurrection
 and who continues to share his life with us
 through bread and wine.

Thank you for sending the Holy Spirit
 who sustains us in our walk together,
 helping us to watch over each other,
 to pray for one another,
 and to work together for justice and truth.

As we eat this bread
 and drink from the cup,
 (signs of hospitality and grace),
 may we be empowered to serve boldly
 wherever you may call.

Accept these prayers
 and our heartfelt thanksgiving
 in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

We Share

The bread

One people, one loaf, a sign of our common faith
 and testimony to the generosity of our lord Jesus Christ.

Take this bread, food for faith,
 and feed on it with thanksgiving.

The wine

One people, one cup, a sign of the new covenant
 poured out for you and for many.

It is a covenant sealed by his blood.
 When we drink we must be thankful
 and agree together never to forget.

We Journey

Holy God,

we have been nourished and had our thirst quenched,
through bread broken and wine poured
in thanksgiving for your son Jesus Christ.

Send us out to be as generous to those we meet this week, that we might show through word and deed that he is not dead, but risen and present among us.

Hallelujah! **Amen.**

Our prayers of intercession

Loving God, we continue to pray for all who are finding this season difficult and for all are who suffering, struggling and bereaved due to the pandemic. We pray for all who work in the NHS at this very busy and challenging time. We pray too for all key workers who continue to work and serve. We pray for those whose businesses and jobs are uncertain or have sadly already been lost. We pray for all those who are in demanding situations and who are in need because of Covid. Loving God, come to their aid and heal those who are unwell, comfort those who mourn, strengthen those who heal, teach and serve, support those in need and be close to those who feel alone, we pray.

We pray for the Ipswich Night Shelter. We pray for your blessing upon the work, your grace upon all the staff and volunteers who serve there and for your care and help for those who sadly find themselves in need of support over the New Year period.

We pray for those we know and love. We pray for one another and especially for those who are in need. We pray that you will watch over them and richly bless them.

We pray for all those among us who have lost loved ones recently. Following the sad loss of Kathy Lankester's dear mother-in-law, we pray that Kathy and all her family would sense your love and comfort at this very sad time.

We continue to pray for Adrian, Stephanie and all the family. May they all sense your love surrounding them at this difficult time of loss. We keep them in our thoughts and prayers, especially on this coming Wednesday 6th, the day of Pearl's funeral at Christ Church.

We pray for all who are saddened by loss and all who feel the pain of loss at this time of the year. We keep Janet, William, and all their family in our prayers. We pray for them and for all who grieve. May they sense your comfort, peace and love in this difficult season.

We pray for Brian who has been unwell with Covid. We pray for your blessing upon Brian and all the residents and staff at Westerfield House.

We pray for Joan, Chikondi, Phyllis Davies and all those in our church family who are facing challenges with their health and all who are receiving medical care and treatment at the moment. We pray also for all those in residential care. May they all know your peace and healing presence in their time of need.

Here is a moment for your own thoughts and prayers today.

Loving Lord, we pray all these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Hymn Lord, the light of your love is shining

Lord, the light of Your love is shining,
in the midst of the darkness, shining:
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us;
set us free by the truth You now bring us –
shine on me, shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine,
fill this land with the Father's glory;
blaze, Spirit, blaze,
set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
flood the nations with grace and mercy;
send forth Your word, Lord,
and let there be light!*

Lord, I come to Your awesome presence,
from the shadows into Your radiance;
by Your blood I may enter Your brightness:
search me, try me, consume all my darkness –
shine on me, shine on me.

As we gaze on Your kingly brightness
so our faces display Your likeness,
ever changing from glory to glory:
mirrored here, may our lives tell Your story –
shine on me, shine on me.

Graham Kendrick © 1987 Make Way Music

A sending out prayer

Lord, as we continue our journey with you this week, as we seek to live out our faith every day,
be with us, surprise us with your love, nudge us when you want us to see or do something new –
for Jesus' sake. **Amen.**

The Blessing

Go and as you go, know this:
In grace you were created, in mercy you have been sustained and in love you will be held forever.
And the blessing of almighty God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
be upon you and those you love, this day and always. **Amen.**

The Grace

Holding each other in our prayers, we say together:

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all,
for evermore. Amen.**

May God bless you all richly, with our love and best wishes to you and your families,

Neil

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