

Welcome

Happy New Year! (unless you are reading this beforehand). May God bless us all as we worship him on this first Sunday of 2021.

Hymn: Sing to God new songs of worship (<https://youtu.be/UpxpB5VRmNQ>)

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come before you today, with Christmas and Hogmanay now passed.

We come before you as many prepare to go back to work and school and routine.

You are before us.

We come before you those of us with a spring in our step,

We come before you of us who can see the days getting brighter

You are before us.

We come to you those of us who are worried about 2021

We come before you those of us who cannot see the way ahead.

You are before us.

We come before you with our guilt, our wrongdoing and messing up,

We come before you asking to be forgiven.

You are before us.

And we all come before you now,

Speaking the words taught to us by Jesus:

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 debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And 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.

Bible Reading

Matthew 2: 1 - 14

Wise Men from the East

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 But you, Bethlehem, *in* the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the [b]wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

The Flight into Egypt

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, 15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

Reflection

There are different explanations for why the wise men brought Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh as presents. And we do not know for certain. A popular explanation is that Gold was brought because Gold recognises the Royal standing of Jesus, That Jesus is a King.

And that Frankincense is an oil used for incense. Frank-incense? An incense used by priests, And that the main role of priests is to open the way to God for people, And so this gift recognises that Jesus now makes it possible for people to enter the very presence of God.

And finally, Myrrh, is a spice used to dress the deceased, and so it recognises that Jesus would die for us. These are popular explanations, for why the wise men choose these three gifts.

Wednesday 6th January will be Epiphany - Which is the twelfth day of Christmas - and marks the official end to the festive season. And while Epiphany may not be such a huge celebration for us now, As it was in centuries past, Or in other parts of the world today, it is still worth celebrating.

At Epiphany we celebrate Jesus being revealed to the wise men with their gifts And we celebrate Jesus being seen as the one who has come to change the world.

And so what I would like to talk about is three different ways that people react to the appearance of Jesus in this passage, As well as talking about the three gifts that were offered.

The first reaction to Jesus is that of hostility, and we see this in extreme form with King Herod, Who is alarmed when he hears about the birth of a child said to be the King of the Jews.

Herod is not always a bad person; History records him carrying out acts of generosity. Herod had spent his whole life climbing to the top of the tree, And wanted to keep control, Wants to keep control of his own life and destiny. And when Herod hears that a baby could get in the way of his plans....Herod was hostile towards Jesus.

And if Herod represents those who are hostile towards Jesus, Then the chief priests and the scribes represent those who are indifferent. Those who are not actively hostile - at least not at the beginning of Jesus life. Those for whom, for now, Jesus did not make the slightest difference to them. Jesus meant nothing to them. They were so engrossed in other things.

So, if Herod in our Epiphany reading shows hostility, And the Chief Priests and Scribes represent responding to the arrival of Jesus with indifference. Then the third reaction in this story. The one represented by the Magi Is that of worship.

In their following of the star to Bethlehem, The wise men show what it is to follow the paths God guides us on. And in their bowing down to Jesus then they show what it is to give your life to Jesus. To recognise that the world has changed, and that even if we are hostile or indifferent, nothing can remain the same.

They show what it is to believe what it says in John 1: 14 That the Word became a human being, and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. As the first non-Jews to come and worship Jesus, They show that no one is excluded from God's plan for salvation.

I've find it fascinating - as I've shared before - that the three gifts may have been much more useful than we thought.

According to the Luke's description of the birth of Jesus, Mary gave birth in a stable, surrounded by animals, with no midwife. She gave birth in what even would be considered deplorable conditions.

Frankincense and myrrh have been used for medicinal purposes for over 5,000 years in places like India and Saudi Arabia. And so might it have been that these gifts were to help this young lady get better?

In our Nine Lessons and Carols Service, Linda played a tune: The Shepherds Farewell - that imagined shepherd's saying farewell to the Holy Family as they escaped Herod's hostility by travelling to Egypt.

Mary and Joseph don't have two pennies to rub together, So how could they afford to get to Egypt and then sustain themselves there? Well, didn't the wise men give them a gift of Gold? And might it be that the gold provided by the wise men provided the means necessary for the flight to Egypt that was to follow at once, and to sustain the holy family in a foreign land?

This is what fascinates me: Might it be that the gifts offered by the wise men meant more to Mary, Joseph and Jesus than the wise men and us might every realise.

And so if this Epiphany story tells of three ways we can react to the coming of Jesus:
To be hostile,
To be indifferent,
Or to worship,
Then which one do we choose as we read this?

And if we choose to worship Jesus, As the Magi did, And then if the Magi gave Jesus gifts that meant so much, Then what gift are we willing to offer him?

As the Christmas Season ends, might the answer be in that final verse of In the Bleak-midwinter?
Amen

Hymn: Praise God from whom all blessings flow (<https://youtu.be/xLPZAKUTle4>)

Prayers for Others

Heavenly Father,
Please, oh please, bless all the nations of the earth in this year.
Bless the places of violence
Of poverty
Of virus
Bless the places of division.
May Your Kingdom come this year!
Please, oh please, bless our homes, our friends and our families.
Bless those we are worried about in 2021,
Be with them God
May our prayers make a difference to them.
May Your Kingdom come this year!

Hear us now God as offer you our own prayers now:

[Pause]

May your Kingdom come this year!

Amen

Hymn: Look forward in faith (<https://youtu.be/7Jl6IbZMegc>)

Blessing

Lead us on,

to learn willingly,

to love well

to live in trust.

Surround us with hope, shield us from harm,

set us on our way rejoicing. Let all God's people say Amen.