

## 4<sup>th</sup> January 2026 – Morning Service

### The Feast of Epiphany

Margaret Bradley

#### Introduction

Our worship this morning will celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. The date of 6<sup>th</sup> January, or the Sunday preceding it, has long been set aside by the Western Christian Church to mark Jesus' manifestation to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish world, by commemorating Wise Men from the East who were seeking enlightenment. Matthew's Gospel tells us how, in their search for truth, love and the meaning of life, they found them in Christ and came to worship him.

#### Call to Worship

Scripture says, 'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.' And so, I invite those who seek Life, to come to the stable, to the one who brings freedom, joy and healing; those who seek Truth, to come to the light, to the one who opens eyes to understanding; those who seek Love, to come to a grace beyond comprehension, to wholeness and peace.

#### StF 227 – Brightest and best of the sons of the morning

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| 1) Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,<br>Dawn on our darkness, and lend us your aid;<br>Star of the east, the horizon adorning,<br>Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.   | 4) Vainly we offer each ample oblation;<br>Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;<br>Richer by far is the heart's adoration;<br>Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.          |
| 2) Cold on his cradle the dew-drops are shining;<br>Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;<br>Angels adore him in slumber reclining,<br>Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.  | 5) Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,<br>Dawn on our darkness, and lend us your aid;<br>Star of the east, the horizon adorning,<br>Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid. |
| 3) Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,<br>Odours of Edom, and offerings divine,<br>Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,<br>Myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine? |   |

*Reginald Heber*

#### Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Blessed be you, Holy God. Here, today, we stand in awe of your beauty and holiness, as wise men once gazed upon an innocent and unknowing child. And we are filled with wonder and praise that this marvellous thing has happened among us. God, you are with us! **To you be all glory, honour and praise!**

Here, today, we stand and look at ourselves and at the world you have made. We gaze on our own beauty and holiness, for you have made us in your image, and you have placed us in a world shot through with marvels and splendour. God, you are with us! **To you be all glory, honour and praise!**

Here, today, we also stand and look at those things that are not good. We regret that the world is marred by hostility and aggression towards others, by distortion of truth, by self-centredness and greed, and we own that those attitudes can be seen in us. Here, today, when the worldly-wise may kneel before innocence, we ask for your grace to begin again. Renew in us that loveliness and holiness that is our true nature. God, you are with us! **To you be all glory, honour and praise!**

## The Lord's Prayer

We ask God to look on us with love's renewing gaze as we join in saying 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. 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.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

## Responsive Canticle - A Song of the Incarnation

The grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all.

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light:  
Light has dawned upon us, dwellers in a land as dark as death.  
For a child has been born for us, a son given us.**

God is love; and his love was disclosed to us in this,  
that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life.

**We know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been:  
he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor,  
so that through his poverty we might become rich.**

God has spoken to us in the Son  
whom he has made heir to the whole universe.

**The Word became flesh and came to dwell among us.  
We saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son,  
full of grace and truth.**

## Reading: Ephesians 3: 1-12 (NRSV)

This extract from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus speaks of God's revelation to the Gentiles.

This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you gentiles, for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

## StF 228 – Hail to the Lord’s anointed

- 1) Hail to the Lord’s Anointed,  
Great David’s greater Son!  
Hail, in the time appointed,  
His reign on earth begun!  
He comes to break oppression,  
To set the captives free,  
To take away transgression  
And rule in equity.
- 2) He comes, with succour speedy,  
To those who suffer wrong;  
To help the poor and needy,  
And bid the weak be strong;  
To give them songs for sighing,  
Their darkness turn to light,  
Whose souls, condemned and dying,  
Were precious in his sight.
- 3) He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth;  
Love, joy and hope, like flowers, spring in his path to birth;  
Before him, on the mountains, shall peace the herald go;  
And righteousness, in fountains, from hill to valley flow.
- 4) Kings shall fall down before him  
And gold and incense bring;  
All nations shall adore him,  
His praise all people sing;  
To him shall prayer unceasing  
And daily vows ascend,  
His kingdom still increasing,  
A kingdom without end.
- 5) O’er every foe victorious,  
He on his throne shall rest;  
From age to age more glorious,  
All-blessing and all-blest.  
The tide of time shall never  
His covenant remove;  
His name shall stand for ever,  
His changeless name of Love.

*James Montgomery*

## Reading: Matthew 2: 1-12 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘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 my people Israel.’ ”

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.” When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## Reflection – The Star

Around this time of the year articles tend to appear in the newspapers, and programmes are broadcast on radio and television, which try to identify the star of Matthew’s Gospel with some astronomical phenomenon that occurred around the time of Jesus’ birth. The most common suggestions are a rare conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, a star explosion called a supernova that flared up in the night

sky, or perhaps a comet. A comet is a 'dirty snowball' with a long tail that was left over from the formation of the stars and planets, and which has been orbiting around the sun ever since, seen by us when it travels in the vicinity of the Earth. So, Halley's comet is visible to the naked eye from Earth around every 76 years. It was last seen in 1986 and will return in 2061.

I would want to suggest that these attempts to identify Matthew's star are misguided. The star in this story isn't like any other star that astronomers have ever observed. It doesn't just rise and shine, it moves. And it moves a lot slower than a comet. It floats across the sky so slowly that travellers can follow it on foot. The star leads them west to Jerusalem, to the palace of King Herod the Great, who had been installed as ruler of Judea by the Roman army who was occupying the land. Then the star turns and moves south to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the revered Jewish King David, leading the way with the precision of a modern sat-nav. Finally, it stopped moving to pour out a steady and illuminating light over one quite specific house where Jesus was. No star or comet that we know acts in this way.

So, instead of getting excited about trying to resolve this astronomical conundrum, I'd like to suggest to you that it's far, far more important to see the star as an early Christian statement about Jesus and his significance.

People who were living in Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were acquainted with writings which spoke of a Jewish priestly king who would arise 'like a bright star, like a comet'. They had hopes that he would free them from Roman rule and make them a great sovereign nation once again. The early Christians came to see **Jesus** as a bright morning star. (We used to sing a song about that – 'He's the lily of the valley, he's the bright and morning star'.) They perceived that Jesus was a light in their darkness. But he wasn't the nationalistic warrior leader like King David that the Jews were looking for. He was a humble, peaceful, spiritual leader in whom God's light was present. And he was significant not just for the small group of Jewish people, but for all the world. Within human beings everywhere there is embedded an urge to seek for spiritual enlightenment, for insight and wisdom. Matthew tells a story of wise men from foreign eastern lands who came to worship Jesus, having seen his light and followed it. Wise people from all nations today are drawn to follow the light of Jesus, to kneel before him and pay him homage.

The important question for us to ask is not 'What was going on in the sky?' but 'Is Jesus a light shining in the darkness?' We believe that the answer to that is Yes! Are there Herods in the world who would seek to extinguish the light? Yes! Does Jesus continue to shine in the darkness and offer us enlightenment, wisdom and authentic life in all its fullness? Yes! Are his followers called to lead people to Jesus and bring light into the dark places today? Yes!

### **StF 231 – The silent stars shine down on us**

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| 1) The silent stars shine down on us<br>With bright but sightless eye,<br>Unmindful of our little earth,<br>Of us who live and die.<br>Are we but grains of stranded sand<br>Beside a cosmic sea<br>That lie unvalued and unseen<br>In such immensity? | 3) We see the star the wise men saw<br>And hope again is stirred.<br>We track the footprints left in time<br>By your incarnate Word.<br>We see them climb a lonely hill<br>Where Love is left to die -<br>The Love that formed the farthest star<br>And hears the faintest cry. |
| 2) Creator of all stars, you came<br>To grace our transient race.<br>In Christ you spoke a Word that broke<br>The silences of space.   | 4) O Christ, the bright and morning Star<br>Whose radiance does not fade,<br>Whose glory filled the universe<br>Before the planets played:  |

Still through that Word you call our hearts  
To know that we are known,  
To trust we do not walk through time  
Unvalued and alone.

Come, heal our hearts of blinding doubt  
Till faith shall end in sight.  
Shine down upon our darkened earth  
And conquer sin's long night.

*Herman G Stuempfle Jr © 1997 GIA Publications*

## **Reflection – The Gifts**

Every Christmas we receive a number of cards that portray three kings with crowns on their heads, travelling on camels, or kneeling before the infant Jesus, and they are truly lovely. But this representation is a common misconception that isn't Biblical. The gospels have no mention of any kings or royal personages. Matthew's Gospel says that wise men, men who valued wisdom, came from the east to Bethlehem after Jesus' birth. It doesn't tell us how many of them there were. Because it says that they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh people have pictured these as coming from three different people and a later tradition even gave names to them. But no number is given.

The three gifts that were offered to Jesus were symbolic.

**Gold** is a soft metal that's precious because of its rarity – all the mined gold in world would fill up just two Olympic-sized swimming pools. Because of that it's become a status symbol associated with royalty or celebrities. Gold is a gift for a king or a queen. Because the Jews were expecting a Saviour who was a kingly ruler, the wise men first went to seek Jesus at the royal palace in Jerusalem. But he wasn't to be found there. This isn't how God does things. We have a habit of turning things up the wrong way. Jesus wasn't born into a palace surrounded by gold, but in a humble stable surrounded by animals and straw. His crown wasn't made of a precious metal. It was a crown of thorns, decorated, not with jewels but with drops of blood. He was accused and cruelly put to death on a political charge, of seeking to undermine the rule of the Romans and set himself up as king of Israel. But Jesus wasn't a king like Herod, who oppressed and killed others. Jesus came to see that the Earth's resources were used fairly and wisely, to bring peace, compassion and right relationships which are a feature of the reign of God.

**Frankincense** was a gift for a priest, the one who interceded between the people and God in worship. Priests burned incense in worship at the Temple of Jerusalem as a sign of the prayers and praise of God's people ascending to heaven. It's referred to as a symbol of prayer and praise in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation to John. Some Christian denominations use incense in their worship as a symbol of the purifying presence of God and to add a dimension of mystery and otherness to accompany the prayers of the church. It was used at my Anglican parish church on Christmas Eve. But if Jesus wasn't a king like Herod, neither was he a priest like Caiaphas and he came into conflict with the chief priests in Jerusalem for his unorthodoxy. They accused him of blasphemy and conspired with the Romans to have him put to death. After Jesus' death his followers declared him to be an eternal High Priest, who intercedes for us and has opened up the way into the holy presence of God.

**Myrrh** is a sap, a resin. Because it's obtained by wounding and bleeding a tree it's a symbol of suffering and death. It's used as an antiseptic salve to bring healing. It's also used to embalm dead bodies. According to John's Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took aloes and myrrh to wrap in the linen cloths with Jesus' crucified body, before laying it in the tomb. This gift foreshadows Christ's suffering and death to bring healing to the world.

And so, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were seen as fitting offerings for the one who brought in the kingdom and rule of God, the one who is our eternal priest and God's suffering servant who offers us wholeness.

The Gospels weren't written as a series of interesting stories about the life and death of Jesus. Their purpose was to challenge us as to how we are going to respond to him. Matthew's story of the wise men

faces us with a choice of being like Herod, who rejected Jesus, because of the implications Jesus' way had on his life-style; of being like the religious leaders in Bethlehem who didn't seek Jesus because they were preoccupied with other things; or of being like the wise men, who pursued their vision, weren't put off when obstacles arose, discerned who Jesus was, and came before him with their worship and offerings. How will you respond?

### **StF 224 – As with gladness**

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| 1) As with gladness men of old<br>Did the guiding star behold,<br>As with joy they hailed its light,<br>Leading onward, beaming bright,<br>So, most gracious Lord, may we<br>Evermore be led to thee.           | 4) Holy Jesus, every day<br>Keep us in the narrow way;<br>And, when earthly things are past,<br>Bring our ransomed souls at last<br>Where they need no star to guide,<br>Where no clouds thy glory hide |
| 2) As with joyful steps they sped,<br>Saviour, to thy lowly bed,<br>There to bend the knee before<br>Thee, whom heaven and earth adore,<br>So may we with willing feet<br>Ever seek thy mercy-seat              | 5) In the heavenly country bright<br>Need they no created light;<br>Thou its light, its joy, its crown,<br>Thou its sun which goes not down;<br>There for ever may we sing<br>Alleluias to our King.    |
| 3) As they offered gifts most rare<br>At thy cradle rude and bare,<br>So may we with holy joy,<br>Pure, and free from sin's alloy,<br>All our costliest treasures bring,<br>Christ, to thee, our heavenly King. |   |

*William Chatterton Dix*

### **Prayers of Thanksgiving**

Remembering how the Magi knelt before Jesus, we bow our heads now as we pray to God.

God of the stars, the heavens, the planets and their orbits, we bring our thanks today for the Magi; for their constant searching for truth; for their openness to the new vision you gave them; for their persistence, even though the journey was hard; for their faith, persuading them to follow their destiny when it led in unlikely directions.

Reveal yourself today to all who truly search for you. May your light shine on us and in us, through all the journeying of our days. **Amen.**

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Eternal God, as wise men came looking for a king, whilst acknowledging that you are Sovereign over all rulers and governments, we pray for people in authority. We pray for those, especially innocent children, whose lives are endangered by the aggressive policies and decisions of those who hold power; for all who are in fear of their lives from bombing and military activities and who are being denied access to food, water and medical care. Righteous God, guide the leaders of the world with your light, to the wisdom of justice and peace, of freedom and respect for every human life.

As people from many nations came to worship Christ, we pray for Christians throughout the world. We pray for the church in our own land and circuit. We commit to you the worship and activities which take place here in this building. Universal God, grant all members of your church a true spirit of adoration.

As the Holy Family shared the life of the people of Nazareth, we pray for our own families and the communities of which we are a part. Loving God, grant them protection from harm and danger.

As your light shone in the darkness, we pray for those who stand in need; for those who are homeless, those who are lonely, anxious or fearful, the sick and the bereaved. We hold before you people who are close to us for whom we are concerned. Compassionate God, uphold, strengthen and comfort them in their pain and grief.

We pray for ourselves. Open our eyes to see your glory and equip us to bless your people. Remind us that the end of our journeying is to be in your eternal presence with those who have gone before. **Amen.**

### **Collect for the Day**

Eternal God, your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, is the light of the world. May your people shine with the radiance of his glory, that he may be known, worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Our final hymn was written by a man who was a Methodist minister at the former Cradley Trinity Church, Lyde Green, which has now been demolished. Rev East had saved up his money to go and visit the Holy Land, and he was very much looking forward to it when a little girl in Cradley became seriously ill. She needed treatment and there was no NHS in those days. Her parents couldn't afford to pay, so he gave them the money he had intended using to go to the land where Jesus walked and talked. As he was walking over Homer Hill one day he felt Jesus' presence with him and he realised that he didn't have to travel to the Holy Land to find Jesus. He could meet him in the quietness of the hillside. He could meet him in the busyness of Cradley Heath market. And as these truths dawned on James East, he was inspired to write this song.

### **H&P 128 – Wise men seeking Jesus**

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| 1) Wise men, seeking Jesus,<br>Travelled from afar,<br>Guided on their journey<br>By a beauteous star.          | 5) Fishermen talk with him<br>By the great North Sea,<br>As the first disciples<br>Did in Galilee.    |
| 2) But if we desire him,<br>He is close at hand,<br>For our native country<br>Is our Holy Land.                 | 6) Every town and village<br>In our land might be<br>Made by Jesus' presence<br>Like sweet Bethany.   |
| 3) Prayerful souls may find him<br>By our quiet lakes,<br>Meet him on our hillsides<br>When the morning breaks. | 7) He is more than near us,<br>If we love him well;<br>For he seeketh ever<br>In our hearts to dwell. |
| 4) In our fertile cornfields<br>While the sheaves are bound,<br>In our busy markets,<br>Jesus may be found.     |   |

*James Thomas East*

### **Blessing**

May God, who led the Wise Men by the shining of a star to find Christ, the Light from Light, lead you in your pilgrimage to find the Saviour. And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit be with you in this season of Epiphany, and always. **Amen.**