

**A service for 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2023 – Epiphany (StF)**

**Call to worship: Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 6**

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.

Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD." Amen.

*Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God’s love to guide us. It was written by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations. We shall sing hymn number 706, ‘Longing for light, we wait in darkness,’*

**1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,  
Longing for truth, we turn to you.  
Make us your own, your holy people,  
Light for the world to see. *Chorus:***

*Christ, be our Light!*

*Shine in our hearts,*

*Shine through the darkness.*

*Christ be our Light!*

*Shine in your Church gathered today.*

**2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.  
Longing for hope, many despair.  
Your word alone has power to save us.  
Make us your living voice. *Chorus:***

**3. Longing for food, many are hungry.  
Longing for water, many still thirst.  
Make us your bread, broken for others,  
Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:***

**4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.  
Longing for warmth, many are cold.  
Make us your building, sheltering others,  
Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:***

**5. Many the gifts, many the people,  
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.  
Let us be servants to one another,  
Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:***

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

*There is room for ..... Angels*

**I am going to use the Methodist Programme, 'There is Room' to show how the Scriptures, especially the Nativity stories invite all-comers to feel part of God's story, irrespective of their lifestyles, or backgrounds. This Sunday, the theme is "There is room for angels."**

**Matthew Ch. 2 vs. 13 – 15 & explanation**

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." It may tell you something about our age or tastes, but Carol and I spent Christmas evening watching Frank Capra's 1946 film, "It's a Wonderful Life". In it a guardian angel, Clarence Odbody, is tasked with saving a philanthropic man, George Bailey, from committing suicide on Christmas Eve. When Clarence succeeded, he received his wings. Whilst I am not declaring a literal belief in winged figures revealing God's will, the Nativity stories have angels appear to the shepherds, to the Magi and to Joseph and I believe that God is speaking to us through personal encounters with friends and strangers, through dreams and conversations.

During Advent through to Epiphany, churches are often visited by non-church-goers or people who haven't been to church for a long time. Can we give them room and time to enjoy their experience? Can we encourage them to come to any social activity – a tea and chat morning / afternoon – where they can get to know us and we them? What can we do as church – a people more than the building – to ease some of the loneliness that burdens our community, especially after COVID19 inflicted itself upon us? By making visitors and strangers welcome, we may make ourselves open to a revelation from God – that visitor may be another Clarence, or Clarissa Odbody. Amen.

***Let us pray.***

Creator God, whose Word brought life to the universe and whose compassion sustains us, you bless us with your redemptive love for all peoples, a love we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. Jesus shared our mortal form and brought Good News to us in words and deeds. We rejoice that his death and resurrection broke the power of sin and death, reconciling fallen humankind to you, our heavenly Father. Jesus offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve, or can do to earn it. Therefore, as we come to offer you all our praise, adoration and thanksgiving in our worship today, take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate upon your holiness and glory

Loving Lord, accept our wholehearted thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet that you made for us, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities to serve you and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for continuing to love us even at our worst, when we are faithless, loveless and disobedient. Amen.

***Let us set ourselves right with our Lord by confessing and seeking forgiveness of our sins. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.***

Merciful God, we confess our failure to live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and sometimes disregard your call to care for others in Jesus' name, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience. In a time

of reflection we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, of being self-centred, rather than Christ-centred. ....

Lord, in your mercy ..... **Hear our prayer.**

Lord of righteousness, help us turn away from wrongdoing and back to you.

Warm and soften our hearts and guide us with your truth. Bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death, allowing us to play our part in building your kingdom here.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus as his disciples, without the burden of guilt. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives become a beacon to draw others to know, love and serve our risen Saviour. Amen.

***We shall say 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 next hymn was written by James Montgomery, a statue of whom stands in Sheffield, where he spent most of his life as a radical newspaper editor and proprietor. He was no respecter of authority and was twice imprisoned, once condemning the brutality of the militia when it dealt with a riot in Sheffield. His newspaper constantly supported the downtrodden and exploited, opposed slavery, poor sanitation, bad housing, the use of boy chimney sweeps and State Lotteries, but supported the teaching of reading and writing in Sunday Schools (State education did not exist until 1871). We sing hymn number 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 (1771 – 1854)*

***We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.***

Almighty God, Christ Jesus your Son came as the True Light for the sin-darkened, broken world, for which we pray now. In recognition of your boundless grace to us, we offer ourselves to play what part we can, however small help build your kingdom here by reaching out to neighbours who are in distress or need. However, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, to whom nothing is impossible. Move the hearts and minds of people who wield power and influence to bring about much-needed change.

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations to be generous to the people of the Developing Nations, where there is great poverty and suffering. We pray for the victims of recent natural disasters, that they may receive speedy help, as well as people in countries facing severe famines, where droughts and warfare have made the situation worse. We ask a blessing on the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of food, energy and inflation increases to record levels. We thank you for food banks, warm spaces and for other initiatives which are helping the poor, but help the Government and other agencies find new ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter.

Heavenly Father, we ask your blessing on people who have been in hospital over Christmas and the New Year and for the doctors and nurses who are caring for them. We

remember, too, the teams of street pastors who have striven to keep late-night revellers from coming to harm. May your healing hand rest upon them and fill them with your peace.

Jesus came to heal and comfort the marginalised and sick whom he met, so we pray for the healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit, recovering from injuries or operations. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need. Remember, Lord, people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers who struggle to manage day by day. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued amidst the problems they are facing.

We know this time of year is especially difficult for many people who have been bereaved, or those who are lonely, who feel undervalued, or who are homeless and unemployed, for seeing others celebrating exacerbates their grief and loss. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help at this time ..... Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they find healing, comfort, hope and peace.

The infant Jesus was forced to escape Herod's wrath by fleeing to Egypt, so we pray for the victims of war and man's inhumanity to man. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern the countries of the world, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. Instead, may they govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of true peace.

Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution. Bring an end to their suffering and help them rebuild their lives in peace and security. Warm our hearts with your love, so we work to ensure that all receive the support they need to have a fresh start and hope for the future.

Saviour, we pray for this church, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside and all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission and draw many to you. Help us to live in the light of your coming and give us a longing to do your will.

Abba, Father, bless us our families and our friends as we answer our call to serve you. May the Holy Spirit make a Christmas in our hearts every day, not just one day each year and may our joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us through everything we do, so we honour you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 12**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

“Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Amen.

*We continue our worship with a hymn by Rt. Revd. Reginald Heber, who was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, as his title implies, but instead to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. He died aged only forty-two, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1826, just after he had preached a sermon at Trichinopoly, in which he denounced the caste system before a large congregation. Hymn number 227, ‘Brightest and best of the sons of the morning’*

1. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,  
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;  
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,  
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

2. Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;  
Low lies his head, with the beasts of the stall;  
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,  
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.

3. Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,  
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine?  
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,  
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

4. Vainly we offer each ample oblation;  
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;  
Richer by far is the heart’s adoration;  
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

5. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,  
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;  
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,  
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

© Reginald Heber {1783 – 1826}

### **Sermon: *Magi***

The magi, or wise men, were astrologers who predicted the future by looking at the position of stars and planets in the night sky, if you like, **Russell Grants** of their era. They were Gentiles, unfamiliar with the Jewish faith, yet when they reached Jerusalem, they found Herod and his advisers unaware of the birth of the Messiah. Their enquiry about ‘**one born king of the Jews**’ caused a real storm. Far from welcoming a child who scriptures said would grow to re-establish a close relationship between God and his people, Herod and his court saw the infant as a threat to his power. No one, not even the high priests, asked to accompany the magi, so they could see and worship the baby, yet in Matthew’s words, the

magi **'saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.'**

It is worth noting that our gospel passage says that the magi found Mary and Jesus living in a house, not the stable, so it is reasonable to suggest that Jesus could have been eighteen months old and the magi were rather late for the celebration! ***To be fair to them, scholars think they came from Persia, or modern-day Iran, or even what is now the Yemen, so they may have travelled at least 1500 miles. However, that is not an important detail to distract us from the inclusive nature of the story.*** It is clear that, had magi understood the Jewish faith, they would not have asked Herod their question about the new king and the lives of as many as twenty baby boys around Bethlehem might have been saved from the wrath of a paranoid king who killed his wife, Mariamne, their two sons and a number of close relatives, too. However, the magi's gifts identified three things about the child they had come to see. Their gift of **gold** showed he would be a king (though not in earthly terms). **Frankincense** indicated he would be holy, while **myrrh** foretold his death. Yet, ironically, the Jews in Jerusalem, who had been waiting for more than seven hundred years for the Messiah, were blinded by their prejudices against the infant Jesus. And they considered themselves **'God's chosen people'**.

Luke and Matthew's nativity stories show how two groups of people who met the infant Christ were despised by 'respectable' Jews: shepherds were ceremonially unclean because they were unable to observe the food and hygiene laws when they were with their flocks; worse still, they were deemed so dishonest, as a result of claiming others' sheep as their own, that they could not give evidence independently in court. Magi were also doubly-damned: they were Gentiles, considered beyond the reach of God's grace and astrology is banned in the law given to Moses, the penalty for fortune-telling being death for Jewish practitioners. Despite the low esteem in which both magi and shepherds were held by Jews, God revealed the infant Jesus to them, not to Herod, nor High Priests like **Annas**. The most powerful and important Jews weren't the first to see the Messiah, as they'd expected. Instead, outsiders, despised foreigners as well as society's lowly and marginalized received that blessing, so God's kingdom stands traditional values on their heads and, thereby, gives us all hope.

There are some who will look down on the wise men because they were clearly rich. Not only did they offer expensive gifts, but they could afford to spend a great deal of time and money travelling from their homes to Bethlehem. In the Methodist 'There is Room for....' programme, I have preached that Jesus came for the poor, marginalised and rejected, but what about the wealthy? I recall a conversation I had with a local preacher last year in which he challenged me to consider the position of rich people in God's kingdom. Geoff observed that, if we dismiss them as unlikely to have a place in the kingdom, then what is the point of them striving to follow the Lord? Whilst it is true that we have the blessings and woes of the Sermon on the Plain, the rich young ruler, the wealthy man and Lazarus, and the rich fool as negative examples of being wealthy, if we consider each case, we see that it is the love of wealth that is the problem. The wealthy in the woes, the wealthy man who ignored Lazarus and the rich fool are unwilling to share their God-given blessings and are complacent to the point of indifference to the suffering of others. The rich young ruler put his trust in material things, not in God. It is materialism that separates us from God, not wealth.

John Wesley wrote a wonderful sermon on 'The Use of Money' which is best summarised as **'Make all you can, Save all you can and Give all you can as long as ever you can'**. Philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie, Robert Owen, the Cadburys and Rowntrees used much of their wealth to improve the lives of many people, while Bill and Melinda Gates are using their huge fortunes to bring about change throughout the world. Rather than cynically seeking vested interests in philanthropists, I rejoice in them, for they are responding to God's providence by sharing it with the needy.

Matthew's teachings are: if we seek Christ diligently, we'll find him. Some of the amazing features of the nativity stories are they show that Jesus came for not only ordinary people, but those looked down upon as outsiders, people deemed beyond God's love. The good news is that nobody is beyond God's love, because of Jesus. **Everybody is welcome in God's story. My friends we've seen the inextinguishable light of God's love in Jesus – so let it shine out in our words and deeds to both friends and strangers, so we can bring light to the darker corners of our world in his holy name. Amen.**

*We conclude our worship with a hymn written by William Chatterton Dix, who was born in Bristol and became manager of a Glaswegian marine insurance company. He wrote this hymn at Epiphany, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1860, when he was too poorly to attend the services at St. Raphael's church. Soon afterwards, an idea came to him of using the example of the Wise Men for all Christians through a poem, and, before he went to sleep that night, he had written out the words of "As with gladness men of old". It was set to a tune written in 1838 by the German Conrad Kocher, adapted by the great W.H. Monk for the first edition of 'Hymns Ancient and Modern' (1861) and called 'Dix' in honour of the writer of the words. Ironically, Mr. Dix was not very fond of the tune which bears his name. Hymn number 224, 'As with gladness men of old'.*

**1. 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 to thee.**

**2. 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.**

**3. As they offered gifts most rare  
At thy manger 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.**

**4. 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.**

**5. 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 for ever may we sing  
Alleluias to our King.**

*© William Chatterton Dix {1837 – 1898}*

***Benediction.***

May the trust of the Virgin Mary, the steadfastness of Joseph, the wonder of the shepherds, the diligence of the Magi, the rapture of the angel host and the boundless love given to the world in the Christ-child, keep and sustain us and the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and the whole world now and forevermore. Amen.