

A service for 4th January, 2026 – 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, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK. 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---}

The Nativity stories invite all-comers to feel part of God’s story, irrespective of their lifestyles, or backgrounds. This Sunday, my theme is ‘There is room for angels’.

Our first reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 13 to 15

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 love to watch Frank Capra's 1946 film, "It's a Wonderful Life". In it a guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, 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.

Between Advent and 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, both young and old? By making visitors and strangers welcome, we may make ourselves open to a revelation from God – that visitor may be another Clarence, or Clarissa Oddbody. Amen.

One of the best known carols referring to angels was written by James Montgomery, who was known as a radical, campaigning editor and owner of a Sheffield newspaper in the early to mid -Nineteenth Century. "Angels from the realms of Glory" was first printed in 1816 in his newspaper, "The Sheffield Iris", entitled 'Nativity'. It is sung to 'Iris' a Flemish melody arranged by Martin Shaw and echoes the name of James' newspaper. We shall sing, hymn number 190, 'Angels from the realms of glory,'

**1. Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
You who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth; *Chorus:***

*Come and worship,
Christ, the newborn King.*

*Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.*

**2. Shepherds, in the field abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light; *Chorus:***

**3. Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations;
You have seen his natal star; *Chorus:***

**4. Saints, before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending
In his temple shall appear; *Chorus:***

**5. Though an infant now we view him,
He shall fill his Father's throne,
Gather all the nations to him;
Every knee then shall bow down; *Chorus:***

© James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we have come to worship you at the beginning of a New Year with all its opportunities and challenges ahead of us. Some of these may excite us, or make us afraid or sad. Help us to travel in faith and hope as we remember that you are loving and faithful, always here with us as we face the future. We surely know you love us, for you entered our world as a helpless child, Jesus, who was born without status or wealth. His birth in the stable of an inn, at humble Bethlehem, to ordinary parents, shows clearly your concern for ordinary people, not just an exclusive minority.

As Jesus grew among us, he shared our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our trials and temptations showing us how you want us to live. By his death and resurrection Jesus conquered sin and death, offering us all everlasting life through faith in him. Therefore, Lord, may we pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your word attentively, for you are our Lord and God and you alone are worthy of all honour, glory, power and praise.

Faithful, loving God accept our thanks for this beautiful world and for all the good things we enjoy, for all that you have done for us and given us, for opportunities and experiences that have enriched our lives, for people who have loved, guided and inspired us. Thank you for coming as Christ Jesus our Saviour and friend, so we may travel through life with him as our strength and stay.

Merciful Lord, forgive us when we sin against you and our neighbours in our thoughts, words and deeds, for Jesus has taught us how we ought to live. Help us to change our ways, so our hearts are warm and welcoming with the love you give us so abundantly. Make our hearts fitting places in which Christ Jesus may dwell.

Heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers and we believe you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow you once more. May we may serve you and our neighbours faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onward, living out the gospel message in all we say and do, and bringing the gospel light to a world darkened by sin and selfishness. 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 also written by James Montgomery, a statue of whom stands in Sheffield, where he spent most of his life. He became owner of "The Sheffield Register" after the original proprietor had to flee abroad. He changed the name of

the paper to “The Sheffield Iris”. His newspaper constantly supported the downtrodden and exploited, opposed slavery and the exploitation of the poor, but supported the teaching of reading and writing in Sunday Schools (State education did not exist until 1871). We shall 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

We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away.

Almighty God, Christ Jesus your Son came as Light for our broken and sin-darkened world, for which we pray now. Although we offer ourselves to play what part we can to help people who are in need, or distress, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, to whom nothing is impossible.

Help us to play our part, however large or small it may be, to build your kingdom by our discipleship. May we faithfully answer our call to serve you and reach out to support our community and people further afield. Bless our church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Unite us in love and service, so we may proclaim good news in words and actions, becoming a light in a dark, troubled world.

Bless the work done by organizations like food banks, street pastors and the Salvation Army who serve the poor and vulnerable in our society and also Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations who address the grievous poverty in the Developing World, besides countries left stricken by natural disasters.

Lord, hear our prayer for blessing on all who are in hospital over Christmas and the New Year and for the doctors and nurses who care for them. May your healing hand rest upon them and fill them with your peace. Jesus came to bring healing and comfort to the marginalised and ill whom he met, so we pray for healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit. 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.

We know this time of year is especially difficult for many who have been bereaved, for seeing others' celebrations exacerbates their grief and loss. It is a painful time, too for people who are lonely, for the estranged and for those who feel undervalued or unloved. 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 who need your help at this time

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Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience 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. We pray for peace in the many lands. Including Ukraine, the Holy Land, Myanmar and Sudan where fighting mars the lives of ordinary people, or where people flee from terrorism, oppression, discrimination and cruelty. Guide the leaders of the world to seek justice and mercy in their dealings and to reject the temptation to use force in order to impose their will on others.

Abba, Father, bless us, our families and 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. May our joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us become a light to our neighbours, so we honour you in the lovely 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. Bishop Heber was a modest and conscientious man, whose sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop. Sadly, he died aged only forty-two, on 3rd April, 1826, just after he had preached a sermon denouncing the caste system at Trichinopoly. 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: The Magi

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.

The magi, or wise men, were astrologers who predicted the future by looking at the position of stars and planets in the night sky. 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! It is also 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 are significant, for they 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'**.

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. I have often 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 a few years ago in which he challenged me to consider the position of rich people in God's kingdom, observing 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, not wealth itself. 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 effectively: 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, 6th January, 1860, when he was too poorly to attend the services at St. Raphael's church. Consequently, he decided to read the account of the Magi in Matthew's gospel. 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".

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 joy of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, the worship of the wise men and the peace of the Christ child be yours, not only at Christmastide but always. May Christ, who by his birth united heaven and earth, fill you with joy and peace. And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all and those we love for evermore. Amen.