



WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

3rd JANUARY 2021

EPIPHANY

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>	PARISH OFFICE: Please phone or use e-mail to make contact TEL:01252 331161; e- mail: office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 331161 WEBSITE: www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk
Isaiah 60 v 1 - 6	
Ephesians 3 v 1 - 12	
Matthew 2 v 1 - 12	



THE SEASON OF EPIPHANY

In the Western churches, the Epiphany ('manifestation') became an occasion to celebrate one element in the story of Christ's birth, the visit of the far-travelled magi, understood as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Matthew's account speaks simply of 'wise men from the east'; later tradition fixed their number at three, made them kings and recalled their resonant names – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

In this perspective, Epiphanytide is an apt season to pray for the worldwide mission of the Church. The feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, (25th January) appropriately falls in the Epiphany season, as does the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18th to 25th January). In the Eastern churches, the Epiphany is, rather, the celebration of Christ's baptism at the hands of John, when the heavens were opened and a voice from heaven declared Jesus to be God's beloved Son. The miracle of Cana in Galilee, where Jesus 'first manifested his glory', follows immediately:

Manifest at Jordan's stream,
Prophet, Priest, and King supreme;
and at Cana wedding-guest
in thy Godhead manifest.

(Christopher Wordsworth)

The arrangement of the Sundays of Epiphany in the Revised Common Lectionary deliberately draws out these aspects.

The season of joyful celebration that begins at Christmas now continues through the successive Sundays of Epiphany, and the festal cycle ends only with the Feast of the Presentation (Candlemas on 2nd February). The child who has been manifested to the magi at his birth is now recognized by Simeon and Anna, when he comes to be presented in the Temple according to the Law of Israel. He is both 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' and 'the glory of God's people Israel'. But the redemption he will bring must be won through suffering; the Incarnation is directed to the Passion; and Simeon's final words move our attention away from the celebration of Christmas and towards the mysteries of Easter: *'Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'* (Luke 2 v 34 – 35)'

FATHER KEITH AND CAROL WISH YOU ALL EVERY BLESSING FOR A HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER NEW YEAR! THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR GOOD WISHES AT CHRISTMAS.

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – BAPTISM OF CHRIST

Genesis 1 v 2 - 5; Acts 19 v 1 – 7; Mark 1 v 4 - 11

ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN - If you would like prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 This is a confidential service.

CARE AND SHARE - If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk, tea, coffee etc. for the shelves outside church, please leave items on the doorstep of the Rectory.

Thank you to all who have contributed so far. It looks like the need will be there into the New Year.

ST PETER'S CHURCH CALENDARS

Ideal presents, our calendar for 2021 has pictures of St Peter's and room for appointments. Only £5 - now available – at the back of church.

MOTHER'S UNION - Wishing all our members a very happy, healthy and peaceful Christmas and a Happy New Year. Looking forward to restarting our meetings as soon as we are able to meet again safely. Barbara Ridley

Please pray for the souls of all the recently Departed, among them: PETER ROBERTS

Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday Feast of Epiphany

If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand.

(L) O Lord, open our lips
All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

(L) Your light springs up for the righteous
All: and all the peoples have seen your glory.

A candle is lit

(L) Blessed are you, Sovereign God,
king of the nations,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
From the rising of the sun to its setting
your name is proclaimed in all the world.
As the Sun of Righteousness dawns in our hearts
anoint our lips with the seal of your Spirit
that we may witness to your gospel
and sing your praise in all the earth.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
All: Blessed be God for ever.

This hymn is said or sung:

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.

As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before
Him whom heav'n and earth adore;
So may we, with willing feet,
Ever seek Thy mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
At that 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 heav'nly 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.

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before
us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) The grace of God has dawned upon the world
through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself
for us to purify a people as his own. Let us confess our
sins.

We keep a moment of silence:

(L) God be gracious to us and bless us,
and make your face shine upon us:
Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

May your ways be known on the earth,
your saving power among the nations:
Christ, have mercy.

All: Christ, have mercy.

You, Lord, have made known your salvation,
and reveal your justice in the sight of the nations:
Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

(L): May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour
forgive us our sins
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

We now say The Gloria together:

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

The collect for Epiphany:

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Read Isaiah 60 v 1 – 6 followed by Psalm 72 1 - 15
concluding with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Read Ephesians 3 v 1 – 12

This Canticle is said:

All Above you the Holy One arises,
and above you God's glory appears.

- 1 Arise, shine out, for your light has come, ♦
the glory of the Lord is rising upon you.
- 2 Though night still covers the earth, ♦
and darkness the peoples;
- 3 Above you the Holy One arises, ♦
and above you God's glory appears.
- 4 The nations will come to your light, ♦
and kings to your dawning brightness.
- 5 Your gates will lie open continually, ♦
shut neither by day nor by night.
- 6 The sound of violence shall be heard no longer in
your land, ♦
or ruin and devastation within your borders.
- 7 You will call your walls, Salvation, ♦
and your gates, Praise.
- 8 No more will the sun give you daylight, ♦
nor moonlight shine upon you;
- 9 But the Lord will be your everlasting light, ♦
your God will be your splendour.
- 10 For you shall be called the city of God, ♦
the dwelling of the Holy One of Israel.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Above you the Holy One arises,
and above you God's glory appears.

(L) Alleluia, alleluia.

We have seen his star at its rising,
and have come to pay him homage.

All: Alleluia.

Now read Matthew 2 v 1 - 12

Here are some thoughts on today's readings from Fr Keith:

When it comes to holidays, I have to confess to being an obsessive planner! No lazing on a beach or taking a siesta for me while I'm away! In my mind, there is always so much to see, and I try to plan to see as much of it as possible in the time available.

Not everybody's idea of a relaxing break maybe, but making the most of every minute is what I enjoy, and the pre-holiday research that makes this possible is, for me, all part of the fun. I remember being appalled by a colleague who once told me that he hadn't even purchased a guide book for the place where he was going on holiday – I was speechless!

Now all this came to mind when I started thinking about the journey that we are celebrating today on the feast of the Epiphany. A complete contrast to how I approach travel, was the coming of the wise men to visit the baby Jesus. No guide book or map to show them the way, and a spontaneity about the whole thing that is very alien to my trips! Matthew tells us that they 'observed his star rising' and 'came to pay him homage.' They set out, it seems, with little preparation and just let themselves be guided by God to the place where the child was.

Even for those not so obsessed with planning as me, I think that is remarkable. Most people like to know where they are going before setting out on a journey. But the wise men only knew that they were heading to see the King of the Jews – exactly where they would find him was a mystery to them. Only when Herod's advisors mentioned Bethlehem did their final destination become clear. Now, that takes trust and faith on a scale that lots of us would, I suggest, find difficult.

Last year we all experienced what it was like to have even

our simplest plans changed at the last minute. Part of the stress of the pandemic, for many people, has been the feeling that they have lost control of their lives. Job insecurity, financial insecurity, not knowing when next you might be able to catch up with loved ones, has made dealing with the ever-present threat of a potentially life-threatening illness, even more difficult to bear. Even those of us with a faith, have found that faith stretched to the limits at times. We have had to live with the unknown to an extent that none of us have ever had to do before.

All of this, for me, makes the story of the wise men even more relevant than usual this year. They were intelligent people who, presumably, usually looked at life in a rational way. Today we would see them as scientists, and expect them to think carefully about any phenomenon they observed before acting on the evidence. And yet, on this occasion it seems that they allowed themselves to be led into the unknown in a more impulsive way. Sensing the importance of the heavenly object they had been watching they set out immediately. They felt drawn to be part of this world changing event and set distance and inconvenience aside to get to see it for themselves.

How much they knew about the God of Israel we can only speculate, but God wanted his Son to be here as much for Gentiles as Jews and so he called them to come. The wise men were very much a part of God's plan. They were not compelled to come, of course, their freewill was not compromised, but the rising of that particular star was enough to arouse their curiosity and they themselves took the risk of a long journey to find out more. Their reward was a personal encounter with the Saviour of the world himself.

As we begin a New Year, living with continuing uncertainty and with our lives still being disrupted, perhaps the story of the wise men can help and inspire us as we step out into the unknown. The same God who led them to come and worship the new born king, will continue to lead us in the months ahead if we trust in Him. Like the wise men, we *will* be looked after, God will never let us down. King Herod himself couldn't overturn God's plan back then, and God ensured that His Son and the wise men were saved from his wrath. Their trust and obedience ensured that they were not only led to Jesus, but were able to return safely to their homes, their lives having been changed forever by the encounter they had had.

We do not know what challenges and opportunities lie ahead for us in 2021. We will make plans that may have to change drastically. But, whatever the next twelve months will bring, we can be certain that the same God who guided those wise men so long ago, will be there to guide us if we have faith enough to listen and to trust Him. We need courage to step out into this New Year as the wise men did. We know that our ultimate destination is to be with God in eternity, but along the way we, like them, will have other destinations that God has prepared for us, to enrich our lives and strengthen our faith in Him.

Also, we, like them, have treasures to bring to our King. Not gold, frankincense and myrrh maybe, but the time and talents that we have been entrusted with. Let us not waste them but offer them willingly and joyfully in His service. Let us set out to follow wherever God leads us, and so experience for ourselves more of the love which God wishes to lavish upon us. Let's also share that love with others who, like us, are facing continuing uncertainty and so many challenges. By walking together, under God, we will then, I'm sure, ultimately find ourselves, like the Magi, overwhelmed with joy. Amen.

Now pause for your own reflections.

This Carol may be said or sung:

Earth has many a noble city;
Beth'lem, thou dost all excel:
out of thee the Lord from heaven
came to rule his Israel.

Fairer than the sun at morning
was the star that told his birth,
to the world its God announcing
seen in fleshly form on earth.

Eastern sages at his cradle
make oblations rich and rare;
see them give, in deep devotion,
gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Sacred gifts of mystic meaning:
incense doth their God disclose,
gold the King of kings proclaimeth,
myrrh his sepulchre foreshows.

Jesus, whom the Gentiles worshiped
at thy glad Epiphany,
unto thee, with God the Father
and the Spirit, glory be.

(L): We now affirm our faith in the words of the Creed:

All I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

(L) O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
All: let the whole earth tremble before him.

(L) Tell it out among the nations that the Lord is King.
All: O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

(L) Tell out his salvation from day to day.
All: Let the whole earth tremble before him.

(L) Declare his glory among the nations
and his wonders among all peoples.
All: O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him.

We now say 'The Benedictus' together:

All: This is the Christ, the Chosen of God,
the one who will bring healing to the nations.

1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦
who has come to his people and set them free.

2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦
born of the house of his servant David.

3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,

4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦
and to remember his holy covenant.

5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.

7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, ♦
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦
by the forgiveness of all their sins.

9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, ♦
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All: This is the Christ, the Chosen of God,
the one who will bring healing to the nations.

*Now we turn to God in a time of prayer, written today by
Ceri Hurcombe:*

Let us worship the Saviour with joy and make our prayer to
our heavenly Father.

The Magi came from the east to worship your Son:

Father, grant to Christians everywhere the spirit of
adoration, a commitment to follow in your footsteps and to
walk in faith confidentially as the Magi did.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The infant Christ received gifts of gold, incense and myrrh:

Father, accept the offerings of our hearts, minds and actions
especially at this time where our community and the country
are living through such a challenging situation. Help us to
use our gifts to shine light where there is darkness, donate
food where there is hunger and provide hope where there is
despair.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The Magi had to return after visiting Jesus along a different
path. Help us Lord to adapt to circumstances and keep
moving forward. Help us to walk alongside those who are
lost or lonely on their journey.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Father, look with mercy on all who are poor and powerless,
and all who suffer.

We pray for all Christians who are persecuted for their faith.

Help us to use our gifts for the good of others, especially at this difficult time and especially to those in our community who are isolating or shielding during the local rise in Covid numbers.

Father we pray for all those who are unwell. We pray for those with Covid and for those whose treatment for other things including cancer has been disrupted during the pandemic. We give thanks for the wonderful NHS and for all those who have worked through the Christmas holiday providing care to all those who are sick. We give thanks for the health of Keith and pray that all those in our church family are kept safe.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Your Son was born into a family who loved him dearly. We pray today for all families in our communities. We pray that those who need support aren't afraid to ask. The past year has been a challenge for many families. Place your loving arms around families Lord who are struggling financially or emotionally.

Father, protect in your love our neighbours, our families and this community of which we are a part.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who have died over the past few weeks at what is an extremely difficult time with visiting restrictions and Christmas. We ask for you to send warmth to those who mourn and to help us to be there for others who are overwhelmed by loss.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Father, we rejoice in our fellowship

We give thanks for our church community and for the new ways we have found to be together and support each other. We give thanks to all who have led services here, for the advent group, for online services and especially for those in the prayer chain.

Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Lord we ask you to illuminate our lives with the light of your love. By the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

This Carol may be said or sung:

We three kings of Orient are;
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Refrain:

*O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

Born a King on Bethlehem plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again,

King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising,
Worship him God on high.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone cold tomb.

Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Earth to heav'n replies.

Let us pray:

(L) Lord God,
the bright splendour whom the nations seek:
may we who with the wise men have been drawn
by your light
discern the glory of your presence in your Son,
the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(L) May God the Father,
who led the wise men by the shining of a star
to find the Christ, the Light from light,
lead us also in our pilgrimage to find the Lord.
Amen.

May God the Son,
who turned water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana,
transform our lives and make glad our hearts.
Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit,
who came upon the beloved Son
at his baptism in the river Jordan,
pour out his gifts on us
who have come to the waters of new birth.
Amen.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us, and
remain with us, today and always. Amen.

(L) Let us bless the Lord.
All: Thanks be to God.

All: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the
mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory.
Amen.



Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

From the rising of the sun to its setting
your glory is proclaimed in all the world.

A lamp or candle may be lit.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God,
our light and our salvation,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
You gave your Christ as a light to the nations,
and through the anointing of the Spirit
you established us as a royal priesthood.
As you call us into your marvellous light,
may our lives bear witness to your truth
and our lips never cease to proclaim your praise.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

This hymn may be said or sung:

Brightest and best of the suns 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.

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.

Say, shall we yield Him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom and off'rings divine?
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

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.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,
we pray with one heart and mind:

Silence is kept.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,
so may your mercy come down upon us
to cleanse our hearts
and set us free to sing your praise
now and for ever. Amen.

A Psalm is said: Mon 87; Tue 97; Wed 98; Thurs 118; Fri 145; Sat 36 ending with:

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between the two readings we say:

All You created all things, O God,
and are worthy of our praise for ever.

1 You are worthy, our Lord and God, ♦

to receive glory and honour and power.

- 2 For you have created all things, ♦
and by your will they have their being.
- 3 You are worthy, O Lamb, for you were slain, ♦
and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and nation.
- 4 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests
serving our God, ♦
and they will reign with you on earth.

All To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb ♦
be blessing and honour and glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.

All You created all things, O God,
and are worthy of our praise for ever.

Readings:

Monday Ruth 2; Colossians 3 v 1 - 11
Tuesday Ruth 3; Colossians 3 v 12 to 4 v 1
Wednesday: Ruth 4 v 1 - 17; Colossians 4 v 2 - end
Thursday: Jeremiah 23 v 1 - 8; Matthew 20 v 1 - 16
Friday: Jeremiah 30 v 1 - 17; Matthew 20 v 17 - 28
Saturday: Isaiah 61; Titus 2 v 11 - 14 & 3 v 4 - 7

After the second reading we say:

Arise, shine, for your light has come;
the glory of the Lord is rising upon you.

All Arise, shine, for your light has come;
the glory of the Lord is rising upon you.

God's salvation has been openly shown to all people.

All The glory of the Lord is rising upon you.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

All Arise, shine, for your light has come;
the glory of the Lord is rising upon you.

Gospel Canticle: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)

All Behold, my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
the anointed one on whom my Spirit rests.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Behold, my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
the anointed one on whom my Spirit rests.

Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect:

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This hymn may be said or sung:

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him: the Lord is his Name!

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
he will accept for the Name that is dear;
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him: the Lord is his Name!

Let us pray:

Loving God, at this time of crisis when so many are suffering, we pray for our nation and our world. Give our leaders wisdom, our Health Service strength, our people hope. Lead us through these parched and difficult days to the fresh springs of joy and comfort that we find in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

May Christ, who sends us to the nations,
give us the power of his Spirit. Amen.

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo to the Diocese of Guildford for Sun 3rd Jan 2021 marking Epiphany

Nativity plays make us think that the wise men arrived just as the shepherds were leaving.

Well, I'm afraid Matthew 2 suggests that the arrival of these visitors from the Middle East happened some time later, not on the night of Jesus' birth but possibly when he was an infant, even a toddler. That's why the slaughter of the innocents is a culling not of babies but of boys aged two and under.

I'll come back to that. First, if you want to reflect on the pilgrimage of the Magi, I urge you to google that great poem by T.S. Elliot. Today I want to focus on the end of their story, on the verses that link their visit to the Holy Family with their return journey:

*... they knelt down and paid him homage.
Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

These words suggest their encounter with Jesus was transformative: we might even see here the first conversion wrought by our Lord. It wasn't the call to Andrew and Peter. It wasn't the healing of the demoniac who then offered to follow Jesus. It was the Magi, the Wise Men, these legendary figures from the area we now called Iran/Iraq who, having encountered the child Jesus, couldn't return on the route by which they'd arrived.

The narrative makes clear it wasn't their intellect that brought them to Jesus – their intellect took them to Herod's palace, to the logical place where a king might be born. Nor was it the advice or request of Mary and Joseph which made them change their itinerary for the way home. It was the experience of bowing down and worshipping the child; which then became the catalyst for a dream they shared, and then revised their plans.

It's that experience of unadulterated wonder: something which, later, is experienced by Andrew and Peter as, illogically, they left their nets to follow someone they didn't know. And that same experience of wonder that draws the demoniac and so many other people whom Jesus healed - when they were touched by his transformative presence.

What exactly is wonder? I hesitate to offer any definition. In a way, that ruins its essential mystery. Instead let me point to a couple of experiences, ones that will doubtless make you think of others.

One Christmas soon after Sam and I were married I recall our toddler nephews coming to stay. On Christmas morning they were each introduced to a

little pile of presents under our tree. One of the boys got so excited at this realisation that he didn't know where to put himself. I recall him charging down the long corridor of our flat and then, when he got to the end, not knowing which way to turn – he did a double take (Wacky Races style). His joy was founded on the fact that an anonymous donor had delivered some things for *him* – with his name on them! – under *our* tree, 200 miles from home. How could that be?! The sheer wonder that someone he did not know could be so abundantly generous. (Never mind what was inside – he wasn't so bothered to unwrap them!) Here's a situation that's not knowledge, not intelligence, not sentiment but sheer wonder.

Again, I recall a wonderful outdoor nativity play we used to enact each year with the congregation at Duke Chapel when we lived in North Carolina. Someone shared their country farm – a field, a barn, some bales of hay and a few animals – where family, friends and relations put on their wellie boots and costumes to act it out. I'm guessing our son was maybe four: he didn't have a role but was pulling at me, desperate to get involved and join the throng. It was informal so eventually I let him go – I'm not sure I could've contained him in the audience without a big scene anyway. In his imagination he was there: totally caught up in the story, joining those paying homage around the manger. Someone snapped a picture of him in his anorak looking completely incongruous amidst everyone else in their tea-towels – the visit of the health and safety inspector, someone suggested! – yet open-mouthed in awe and excitement. Totally caught up in the wonder... not knowledge, not intelligence, not sentiment but sheer wonder that God might come to earth and perhaps look a bit like his baby sister.

I dare to think this is the kind of transforming experience which the wise men had, for whom their intelligence and even their own generosity paled into insignificance in the face of the generosity of a God they did not know who took the risk ... the risk of becoming human out of nothing else but selfless love. Even now, though the Christmas season is nearly over, it's not too late, for us to wonder again at God's generosity....and to allow that experience to convert, to transform, to change us.

Now, if the story of the wise men ended there, we could all sleep comfortably every night. Our wonder might never end.

But, sadly, their decision to go home by another route caused unintended consequences. Herod, realising he's been duped by them not returning to give information about the birthplace of the child, is threatened by a rival, and seeks to eradicate the child who might challenge his power and supplant him. Never mind the collateral damage.

And so we come to the bloody slaughter of boys under the age of two. We don't preach on this part of the story very much. It spoils the fairy lights. Perhaps we

want to preserve the 'happy family' of the nativity. Perhaps the slaughter of people to satisfy a dominant power is too close to home, all too contemporary? We may look across the Atlantic to federal death row in the US, or to boys gunned and missing from a secondary school in Nigeria, or to teenage girls in Pakistan forced to convert and marry at peril of their lives... and that's before we recognise the sex trade under our noses in our own green and pleasant land. The innocence of childhood meets the abuse of power – in Jesus' life, in our own communities and right across our world. And the younger it happens, the greater the scarring. Let's get real about this. Jesus is not immune from these dangers in his own experience; and nor is he distant or unaware today. The need for safeguarding was and is and ever shall be, in this world, very great. Exactly in the place of wonder, we have to guard safe space and protect the vulnerable. Exactly at that place of danger, Jesus is our hope: a hope which is the more real for the way as a tiny baby he brings authentic power to its knees. And for the way his own tender life is threatened.

During the past year, especially during the months of lockdown, the incidence of domestic abuse in this country has soared. Women seeking sanctuary from dangers at home yet unable to get away; children vulnerable, lacking for basic protection and provision which in more normal times are mitigated through school and community programmes. If austerity was a problem in our country before Covid-19, let's be clear about the pandemic that we must expect to follow, because low incomes are getting lower and the cost of living is rising, jobs are evaporating and state benefits will not stretch, not now and likely worse post-Brexit. Meanwhile in other parts of the country we are raising children with such a surfeit of pampering and privilege that they have little chance *not* to grow into narcissistic adults.

It is tragic. On the one hand we find the worship of Mammon and on the other hand, on an altar Austerity we find the well-being of the poor at risk of sacrifice.

In the story of Jesus we find the innocence of childhood meeting the abuse of power, and transforming it. Both the power of Mammon, on the one hand, and the power of Austerity on the other. His very vulnerability is vital: this is the manner in which our God is made incarnate – unwrapped, undone. It's the divine vulnerability that initiates transformation... and brings us all to wonder like a child, to be open-mouthed at the crib, to be transformed.

We pray, Lord God, your divine vulnerability may transform the exercise of human power, may bring each of us to our knees, may draw out our treasure for the sake of the poor, may hold us in wonder at the mystery of the Word made flesh.

To the One whose power at work among us can do infinitely more than all we ask or imagine. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. Amen.