

5th January 2025 – Morning Service

Epiphany

Rev Chris Watson

Call to Worship

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we come to Your crib today to pay you homage.

Hail to the Lord's anointed!

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we long for your reign on earth to be fully known.

Hail to the Lord's anointed!

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we yearn for Your justice making the weak strong, turning our darkness into light.

Hail to the Lord's anointed!

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we fall before You and offer You our gifts, knowing that in Your many names, we know you as love.

Hail to the Lord's anointed!

StF 224 – As with gladness

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| 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. | 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 |
| 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 | 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. |
| 3) As they offered gifts most rare
At thy cradle 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. | |

William Chatterton Dix

Prayers of Approach and Confession

Since the beginning, O Ancient of Days, You have called people to follow. Inspiring humanity with moon and star, sun and rain, majestic mountain, fast flowing river, and with the very mystery of life itself, You have called people to be Your own. In the simplicity of Your manger, Lord Jesus, You drew people to Yourself; awe filled shepherds and exotic magi came to worship and to see in You the hopes and fulfilment of all their yearnings. Like a light in the gloom, O Holy Spirit, we see Your brilliance, feel our hearts warmed and gain a sense of direction and purpose.

Forgive us, O Most High, when we fail to see You in Creation, and so exploit and misuse the abundance of life with which we share the planet. Help us to learn, soon, O God, how to live in harmony with nature. Forgive us Lord Jesus, when we seek fulfilment in other things and turn away from You. Teach us, quickly, O Christ that our restless hearts will only find their rest in You.

Forgive us, Most Holy Spirit, when we look for warmth and purpose in strange places instead of in Your all-powerful love. Forgive us, and give us time to change! **Amen.**

Hear good news: God's love seeks us out at great cost. When we turn back to God we find that, like a father, God runs towards us with arms open wide in welcome. Like a mother, God surrounds us with fierce love. Like a rock upon which we stand, God gives us a secure foundation for life. So accept the forgiveness on offer, learn to forgive others, and find the strength to forgive yourself. **Amen.**

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.**

StF 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 your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.
- 2) Cold on his cradle the dew-drops 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 your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Reginald Heber

Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6

'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 hip. 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.'

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

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 when it rose and have come to worship him.'

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah 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 shepherd 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 search carefully 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 when it rose 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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

StF 594 – Lord Jesus Christ

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| 1) Lord Jesus Christ,
You have come to us,
You are one with us,
Mary's Son -
Cleansing our souls from all their sin,
Pouring your love and goodness in;
Jesus, our love for you we sing,
Living Lord. | 4) Lord Jesus Christ,
We would come to you,
Live our lives for you,
Son of God;
All your commands we know are true;
Your many gifts will make us new;
Into our lives your power breaks through,
Living Lord. |
| 3) Lord Jesus Christ,
You have come to us,
Born as one of us,
Mary's Son -
Led out to die on Calvary,
Risen from death to set us free;
Living Lord Jesus, help us see
You are Lord. | |

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Sermon

Most of us don't see the stars very often. Public safety concerns lead to street lighting, we navigate by SatNavs, not stars, and the night skies seem rather peripheral to our concerns. Our forebears, however, realised that the stars were vital to navigate by. The movements of the moon, regular as clockwork, timed seasons, and holidays – Muslim and Jewish festivals, like Easter, depend on calculations from lunar calendars. Most of us are unaware if it's a full or new moon, most of us can't see the stars and almost all of us wouldn't know how to navigate by stars even if our lives depended on it. Now the stars are studied by scientists or astrologers but, for most of us, they are a treat when on holiday in an area with little light pollution. Our readings today, however, were not written in the modern era, but in the ancient world where the light of the sun by day and the moon by night were vital for travel and where the movement of the stars were imbued with meaning in ways they aren't now. The Magi saw a new star, found meaning in that, realised it had something to do with the Jewish people and came to see. Our Old Testament reading rejoices at a time of gloom, despondency, and despair – these pesky prophets always demand we look at things in a different light.

This part of Isaiah was written as the exiles returned to Jerusalem. Years of longing fulfilled, tales of Jerusalem passed down from parents and grandparents to those who had never seen it were now seen as rather lacking. The city was in ruins, those left behind when the city was sacked 70 years beforehand didn't have the skills or resources to run a city, teach the young, or see to the spiritual nurture of the people – those that did were the ones taken into exile. So, the city stood in ruins with incompetent and corrupt officials in charge, the crumbling buildings being a startling image of a crumbling government - and who says the Bible is irrelevant to our contemporary concerns? Worse, the exiles who had kept faith and hope alive in captivity were faced with a religiously apathetic population. Believing they had been punished by God's own hands, unable to worship in a sacked Temple, the people had drifted in their faith and religious practice. In these ruins the prophet tells the people to rejoice! In this despondency the prophet said that light would shine on the city and the people for its time had come! Despite the crumbling buildings and government kings would come bearing gifts. Of course, Matthew saw the fulfilment of this prophecy in Jesus but for the people of the time it gave hope in a dark place, hope like a light shining in the gloom, a light to guide like the stars of night.

Matthew and the writer of this part of Isaiah saw that in God's light new truth would be revealed. Outsiders would come to Jerusalem with the wealth of the nations and the abundance of the sea, exotic commodities would be brought, and Jerusalem would be the centre of trade and prosperity. Those outside the Jewish faith would marvel at the wonders God had wrought for Jews and give thanks to the Most High. In Matthew we see this idea worked out in a very different way to that which the Isaiah passage's author had imagined. The wealth of the nations does not come to the poor stable in Bethlehem. The glory of Jerusalem is not renewed. Hope is not found in a renewed national life. Instead, Matthew has the nations, in the form of these Magi, bringing prophetic gifts and seeing God's light in a sleeping child. God's glory is revealed – just as Isaiah prophesied – but not in might, riches, trade, and fame but in the weakness and frailty of a small child. God's glory is found on the edge, in the backwater of Bethlehem not at the centre of things in the royal palace – of course that's where the Magi first went. Later in the story Matthew shows us God's glory again at work on the edge – on Jerusalem's rubbish tip at Golgotha.

The Church names this celebration Epiphany – meaning revelation. Here we remember the revelation of Jesus to those who were outside the Jewish faith – to these exotic worshippers who represent all of us who worship and who came to faith from outside Judaism. God's universal longing for is seen in these visitors and their gifts. They also represent some more contradictions that we wrestle with. Gold is given, a gift for a king. Yet kings sit on thrones not their poor mother's lap. Kings sleep in luxurious beds not a feeding trough for cattle. Kings have courtiers not animals to attend them. Frankincense is given, a gift for a priest. Yet priests don't live in stables. Priests advise the mighty not flee into exile for fear of a tyrant's rage. Priests have respect not scorn. And who gives myrrh to a baby? Myrrh still used in medicine but then mainly used to anoint the bodies of the dead. I wonder what Mary made of these gifts.

Yet this child given these strange gifts grows up. This child worshipped by Gentiles is schooled in his faith and his scriptures and learns to preach and draw new meaning from ancient texts. This child lauded by king priests champions the poor and the oppressed. This king has no wealth, no armies and no power yet changes the fate of peoples and nations. This priest has more questions than easy answers and inspires women and men throughout the ages to worship and live radical lives. This sacrifice shows us the power of love which defeats all that is evil, even if the defeat involves pain and humiliation.

What is revealed to us in these stories, and the life that follows, is a way of living and loving that still challenges us, that still makes us wonder, that still captivates, enthuses, annoys, and puzzles us. We long to have power and authority, for people to listen, for our old privileges, status and numbers to come back but the revelation we have to deal with is that power is found in weakness, victory found in defeat and sacrifice as the Way of the Cross. Amen

Prayers of Concern

Light of the World we bring You our prayers for our world dwelling in gloom and despondency.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the world at war, or if not at war busy preparing for it. We pray for the people of Ukraine wondering what the New Year brings, for the people of Gaza living ever in fear, for the people of Israel dreaming of security, for the people of Lebanon living on a knife edge, for the people of Syria and for all who live with insecurity, and crushing poverty.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the world in turmoil, creation itself overheating due to human excess; we pray for nations plagued by plastic, for the rich who won't change their ways, for the poor who can't change theirs. We pray for those who lead our world that your light will transform their hearts and minds, that we may flourish and not perish.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the nations, for people looking to blame the poor for the problems of the rich, for those who idolise despots and dictators, for those who defend democracy and our institutions, and for all who seek to make the world kinder and gentler.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the Church, a place where light is supposed to shine, where people are supposed to be safe, and where the Gospel is supposed to be shared with all. Forgive us where we have failed, Good Lord, give us the energy to reform, to choose leaders who work with not over others, and who will call us back to Your light.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for those we know and love who are in any kind of need....And we pray for those we don't know and those we find it hard to love....

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray. Amen

StF 319 – Christ Triumphant

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| 1) Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing: | 3) Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the cross defeated,
Sinners justified: |
| <i>Ch) Yours the glory and the crown,
The high renown,
The eternal name!</i> | 4) Priestly king, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall never
Stifle hymns of love: |
| 2) Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By Your humble birth: | 5) So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon You gazing,
This shall be our song: |

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Blessing

The celebrations are over, turkey eaten, presents given, decorations taken down. Now the work begins, to spread the Good News, to shine the light into the gloom. Go then as messengers with the Christmas hope to lighten the darkness. The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is with you now and always. **Amen**