

**A service for 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2025 (StF)**

**Call to Worship: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year.'**

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,

'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'

And he replied,

'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'

So I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

*These words of Minnie Louise Haskins were used by King George VI for his broadcast to the nation at Christmas 1939 at a time of great uncertainty and fear for the future. However, we can tread confidently into the future, knowing God loves us so much that he came to earth as our Saviour, guide and friend. Our opening hymn by Bernadette Farrell almost echoes Minnie Haskins' words. 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---}

**Let us pray**

God of grace and glory, we come to worship you at the beginning of a New Year, with all its opportunities and challenges ahead of us. Some of these challenges may make us excited, but others may fill us with trepidation. Remind us that you are always here with us as we venture into an uncertain future, for you shared our vulnerability by entering our world as a helpless child to live with us. Lord, we come to pray to you in

faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for you are our strength and stay in both good and bad times and we humbly offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship.

Lord, you not only created the universe and all that lives within it, but when human beings rebelled against you and darkened your creation with sin and misery, you sent your only Son, Christ Jesus, to save us. We remember with amazement how Christ came without status or wealth and was born in humble Bethlehem, in the stable of an inn, to ordinary parents. As Jesus grew among people like us, he shared our joys and sorrows, trials and temptation, our hopes and fears, yet did so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus triumphed over both sin and death for us and death no longer has the last word, for Christ offers eternal life to all who believe in him.

Amazing God, the extent of your love is beyond our understanding, for we confess that, although we want to lead good lives, we often fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and we fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly. At times we fail to help neighbours who are in need or trouble, though we know we really ought to. Lord, help us turn away from our wrongdoing and forgive us in Jesus' name.

Gracious, loving God, we believe you always hear and answer our prayers, so confident that you have already pardoned us, we ask you to help us bear the light of your lovingkindness in everything we do and say, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:***

**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.**

***We shall sing a hymn by Bishop 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 conscientious man, whose sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop. The heat and hard work took their toll of his health and he died aged only forty-two, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1826, eighteen days short of his forty-third birthday. We sing 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}

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

Sovereign God, you are the Light of the world, our trusty guide through life and our refuge in times of trouble. Therefore, as the old year ends and the New Year begins, we turn to you, asking for your wisdom, courage, guidance and help, so we can act as your earthly hands in this corner of your kingdom. Although the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us at times, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out and inspire those with power and influence to heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Loving Lord, come to bring peace, built upon justice and mercy, to all countries. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern in the world, so that they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both support and courage, so they may find healing and rebuild their lives.

We pray for just and lasting resolutions to the wars in Ukraine the Holy Land, Syria, Sudan and Somalia. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many victims of conflicts: the lost lives; those injured in body, mind and spirit, widows and orphans and not least the many refugees who face exploitation and vilification.

Lord of humankind, guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer, too, for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

Lord of shalom, we pray for people from our church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silence, we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will know their needs. ....

Loving Lord, in your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather.

Heavenly Father, as the New Year begins, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. As the New Year begins, keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways, so we bear the light of the gospel message into the darkest corners of your kingdom, in the glorious name of the Christ-child, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem and asked,

“Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them,

“Where will the Messiah be born?”

“In the town of Bethlehem in Judea,” they answered. “For this is what the prophet wrote:

‘Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.’”

So Herod called the visitors from the east to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions:

“Go and make a careful search for the child, and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him.”

And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him. Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. Amen.

*William Chatterton Dix was born in Bristol and became the company manager of a Glaswegian marine insurance company. He was a committed Christian and enjoyed writing hymns, some of which he published in ‘Hymns of Love and Joy’ in 1861. Included in this collection was “As with gladness men of old”, which he wrote out of frustration at Epiphany, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1860, when he was too poorly to attend the services at St. Raphael’s church. 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}

**Sermon: “The Magi” Matthew 2: 1 – 12**

When I was a chaplain, one of the most popular Epiphany carols at Bridge Court used to be John Henry Hopkins' “We three kings of orient are”. All right, I know that this carol is responsible for Christmas cards depicting three oriental gentlemen on camels as they plod their way towards Bethlehem and I know, too, that there is no evidence in the Bible that they were kings, nor that their names were **Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar**, or, even that there were three men, but this carol still has a useful message for us. I think it is unlikely that only three Magi, an order of astrologers, would have travelled for up to two years in ‘bandit country’ – even on Roman roads – without an entourage or guard of some kind, in their quest for a ‘**new-born king**’.

It is noteworthy that the account of the Magi is in Matthew's gospel, written primarily for Jewish converts, for Jews would have regarded the wise men as beyond God's grace. Not only were they cursed as Gentiles, but astrology was prohibited by the law given to Moses, so they were really beyond redemption in Jewish eyes, yet in this nativity account they sought out Jesus, found him and worshiped him. Matthew's unequivocal message is that Jesus Christ is available to all, even the most despised outsiders, if they seek him out. Nevertheless, the story has a dark side for it led to what is called, ‘The massacre of the innocents’.

It seems remarkable that the birth of a baby in Bethlehem may have led Herod the Great to order all male infants of two or less to be slaughtered by his troops, but while there is no historical document recording the massacre of the innocents, it is hardly surprising, for I imagine that the King would hardly want such an event publicised. However, we remember that the magi found Mary and Jesus living in a house, not the stable, so it is reasonable to suggest that Jesus was eighteen months old and the magi

were rather late for the celebration! To be fair to them, scholars think they lived in what is now Western Iran or Ethiopia, so they would have travelled a great distance.

It is ironic that Herod the Great was King of the Jews, yet he wasn't a Jew. He was an Idumean and was appointed by Caesar Augustus to rule Judea on behalf of the Roman Empire, which had conquered the territory. Herod's family had converted to Judaism for political reasons, rather than a matter of faith, so he and his family were tolerated by the Jews, especially when he began to redevelop the Second Temple, built by Ezra and Nehemiah on their return from Exile, to a place of wonder. He also indulged in a number of expensive building projects that provided employment and brought prestige to Judea.

Nevertheless, Herod made enemies among Pharisees and Sadducees because of his lifestyle which certainly paid little heed to the faith he professed. On at least two occasions, he was recalled to Rome, following accusations of cruel treatment of opponents and an allegation by his mother-in-law that he had been involved in the assassination of his brother-in-law, who he considered a rival for his kingdom. As a result, Herod became so paranoid and ruthless that, when his mother and sister told him that his wife, Mariamne, and their two sons were plotting against him, he had all three executed. Nothing and nobody was allowed to threaten his position of power. Indeed, he had a personal bodyguard of two thousand and a network of secret police around the kingdom so he could remain in power.

The magi, or wise men, 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 counsellors 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 wise men **'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.'**

Herod and the upper classes of Jerusalem were frightened by news of a new king, a true king from the lineage of David. Herod had already faced challenges to his reign and only held power because he was useful to Rome, collecting taxes and keeping the trade routes open with his army. He feared that a descendant of King David would naturally be more popular to the Jewish people than he was. He stood to lose power, respect and control – possibly his life – if this new king prevailed. The Jewish political establishment was upset, too, because many of them collaborated with Rome in order to flourish in an occupied land. The religious leaders were corrupt, engaging in nepotism and power-grabbing, rather than seeking righteousness. These leading figures were terrified that the new King would expose their corruption and unite the people against them. They were terrified that the light of truth would expose their hypocrisy, that they, like Herod, would lose their positions, reputations and control which is why they became such powerful opponents of Christ's ministry.

Does fear affect our discipleship? Some people are afraid to be known as Christians in case other people, especially family or friends mock or reject them. A few years ago at Brierley Hill Methodist Church, we had an asylum-seeker from Iran who became a Christian and whose village and her own family turned on her and wanted her to be killed. Others may be afraid that discipleship means their past makes them

unworthy to follow Christ. If so, remember that none of us is perfect and that Jesus died and was raised to give us a new start. It is not what we have done wrong in the past that is important: it is what we do today and in the future that counts.

Some people are afraid of committing themselves to Jesus, because they may have to surrender control over their lives to God in order to answer his call? Remember, Jesus left the glories of heaven to live among ordinary people just like us to save us from our sins by dying on a cross. Are we willing to make big changes to our lives, to set aside our station in life, to risk our reputation and friendships to answer God's call? Certainly, I've known a people who have given up well-paid, prestigious jobs to serve Jesus and I haven't found one who laments that he or she could have been wealthy or powerful, because serving Christ is reward in itself. **Lord, grant us the vision of John the Baptist, the trust of Mary and the steadfastness of Joseph, so we can conquer our fears and follow our Saviour. Amen.**

*Our closing hymn was written by a suffragan Bishop of Thetford and a very gifted hymn-writer, Timothy Dudley-Smith. We sing hymn number 470, 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided'.*

**1. Lord, for the Years, your love has kept and guided,  
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,  
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:  
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.**

**2. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,  
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,  
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:  
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.**

**3. Lord, for our land in this our generation,  
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:  
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,  
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.**

**4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt you,  
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,  
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:  
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.**

**5. Lord for ourselves; in living pow'r remake us –  
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,  
Past put behind us, for the future take us:  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.**

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### ***Benediction***

May the faith of Mary fill us, the steadfastness of Joseph inspire us and the wonder of the shepherds be ours this Christmas. May the diligence of the Magi guide us in our discipleship, may the joy of the angel host and, above all else, may the blessing of the Christ-child be ours now and always. Amen.