

AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION 8th January 2023
Epiphany (available on 01308 293062)

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

Isaiah 60:1

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,
to that lowly manger-bed,
there to bend the knee before
him whom heaven and earth adore;
so may we with willing feet
ever seek thy mercy-seat.

3 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 heavenly King.

Hymn As with gladness men of old

4 Holy Jesu, 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)(Public Domain)

The theme of light dominates the feast of the Epiphany. Guided by the light of the star, the Magi came to Bethlehem to honour the Christ-child. Guided by the light of Christ, we continue our own journey of faith.

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

You grant that those who follow you will not walk in darkness, but in the light of life.

Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

You guide our feet into the way of righteousness. Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

May the God of love and power forgive us and free us from our sins, heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Collect (special prayer for today)

Creator of the heavens, who led the Magi by a star to worship the Christ-child: guide and sustain us, that we may find our journey's end in Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

READINGS Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his

glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

REFLECTION

The feast of the Epiphany is one of the principal feast days on the Christian calendar. It is also a fixed day – the twelfth day after Christmas – so it migrates through the days of the week, although we will usually celebrate it on the nearest Sunday. In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas, with gift-giving tied to treasure bearing wise men instead of a jolly, round man in a red suit. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their home. The hay is for the camels of the wise men, who leave gifts in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.

We hear the story told by Matthew of the wise men (whom we talk of as three), and without much thought, I used to imagine that these men just travelled non-stop towards Bethlehem, once they had seen the star 'as it rose'. But they must have stopped during the day when the star was not visible, and from the very start, the star was most important as a sign that something important had happened or someone special had been born, rather than as a means of guiding them to the Holy family. Indeed, after the initial rising of the star, we don't hear of it again until Herod has told the wise men to go to Bethlehem. So they must have made their way to Jerusalem, and Herod's palace, travelling in the darkness of unknowing; searching and enquiring as they went.

Their journey was most probably neither simple nor easy. They must have encountered difficulties, doubts, and dangers. Yet they persevered in their quest and were rewarded when they finally found Christ.

This is why their story has such relevance for us. Like them, we too are on a journey – the journey of life, the journey of faith. And especially in our faith journey, the magi can serve as models for us. When things get dark and we lose our way, we need to imitate the magi. They were not too proud to ask for guidance. We need to trust that the darkness will pass, just as it did for the magi. And once again we will see the initial star beckoning to us.

The magi were single-minded in their quest to find the Christ-child. They refused to be put off by difficulties. And when they found Christ, they offered their gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh; they opened their hearts, as ours are opened when we find Christ. But that is not the end of the story. We read the story with hindsight. We hear what happened; how the wise men, warned in a dream returned by a different route.

And the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel. Yet how relevant his words are to us today.

*'Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness shall cover the peoples;
Lift up your eyes and look around.'*

We are enjoined both by Matthew and by Isaiah to look around us, to shine as lights in the world, and to take a different path. We might think that meeting the Christ child in the manger is the end point. It is not. The magi took a different route after meeting him. And that is what we are called to do. Christmas is but the beginning. We go through the self-examination and penitential season of Advent which prepares us for the miraculous birth. And then we kneel before the manger.

But if all that we see makes us feel comfortable and self-satisfied with what we are doing, we have not appreciated the significance of Christmas, and we have not taken that different road. While there is still hunger, poverty, injustice, and oppression in the world there is work for us to do.

Christmas is without meaning for us unless we, like the wise men experience that Epiphany and choose a different path having met the Christ child. Jesus' birth heralded the coming of the kingdom. But that was not the end. Our journey continues. We have seen the Christ child. We are called to lift up our eyes and look around, and we need to arise and shine.

INTERCESSIONS

We are all companions on a spiritual journey. As we travel together, let us pray.

We pray that the worldwide Church may always be ready to travel in your way, and in your direction. Light of the world: **shine in our darkness**

We pray for the nations as they live through conflicts; we especially remember the people of Ukraine that your light might shine in their lives, and in the darkest of days.

Light of the world: **shine in our darkness**

We pray for our families, and our communities, asking for a spirit of generous love, understanding, and mutual respect. Light of the world: **shine in our darkness**

We pray for all who walk in the darkness of physical, mental, or spiritual suffering, that your light might pierce the darkness, and restore them to good health.

Light of the world: **shine in our darkness**

We pray for those who have come to the end of their earthly journey following your light, and for those who have died unprepared. Light of the world: **shine in our darkness**

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.**

Amen

Prayers adapted from Susan Sayer

Gathering together all our prayers, we say the prayer that Jesus gave us

**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**

The Kings

1 We three kings of Orient are;
bearing gifts we traverse afar
field and fountain, moor and mountain,
following yonder star:

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

Melchior

2 Born a king on Bethlehem plain,
gold I bring, to crown him again-
King for ever, ceasing never,
over us all to reign:

Chorus

Caspar

3 Frankincense to offer have I;
incense owns a deity nigh:

We give thanks for the saving death and resurrection of Jesus and ask him to be with us now

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen**

We pray God's blessing on each other

May your earthly journey be illuminated by the light of a steadfast faith.
May your lives shine like stars amidst the darkness of the world
And when your earthly pilgrimage is over, may Christ welcome you into his heavenly kingdom.
And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us and
those whom we love and pray for, this day and for evermore. **Amen**

Hymn We three Kings of Orient are

prayer and praising, all men raising,
worship him, God most high:

Chorus

Balthazar

4 Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb:

Chorus

All

5 Glorious now, behold him arise,
King and God, and sacrifice!
heaven sings alleluia,
alleluia the earth replies:

Chorus

John Henry Hopkins (1820-1891)(Public Domain)