

# Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany

*All-Age Communion, Epiphany, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2024*

Epiphany was actually yesterday, 6<sup>th</sup> January, the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas (at least in Anglican calendars, where December 25<sup>th</sup> is the first day of Christmas), but this is the nearest Sunday, so we are celebrating it today. The word Epiphany is derived from Greek, *epi* meaning outside, and *phainein*, to show. It is revealing something, displaying it, manifesting it, making it known. For Christians, Epiphany with a capital 'E' is the festival in which Jesus Christ was revealed to the gentiles.

And the gentiles concerned were the wise men, *magi*, priests of the Zoroastrian religion from the Parthian Empire, which is roughly Iran, Iraq and Syria now. (What would one of a number of magi be called?) They came because of a prophecy about a king, heralded by a star.

And they came bearing gifts. Rich, expensive gifts, suitable for a king.

I have some gifts here. I would like some volunteer magi to come and help distribute them:  
[Gold (chocolate coins), frankincense (well, incense at least), myrrh (ointment).]

The gifts the wise men brought were a bit more valuable, and serious. What were they? (OK, a more tricky one: what were the wise men called, and which brought which gift?<sup>1</sup>)

Gold – from the ground, from mines, or sometimes found on the surface of the earth, or in streams. Then, as now, it was a precious metal, used a currency. Also used for jewellery, for ornaments. 34 tons were used in making Solomon's temple (1 Kings 4-10), for overlay on the walls and making utensils.

For a king. Gold is precious. *Gold I bring to crown him again* is the line from We Three Kings (which we are singing later). Sometimes seen as a sign of virtue.

Frankincense – Old French *franc encens*, which mean real, or high-quality incense. (I always used to think it was German incense, but it's not.) Also called olibanum. It is gum from the trunk of the Boswellia tree, mainly grown in the Horn of Africa, though one species grows in India.

For one who is a God. Incense is often associated with worship (in some Anglican churches too). *Incense owns a deity nigh*. Symbolises prayer.

Myrrh – difficult to spell, but a good Scrabble word if you can spell it. Resin from small, thorny tree called *commiphora myrrha*, again from the Horn of Africa, but also from the Arabian Peninsula. Used by the Egyptians for embalming mummies. In Jewish religion it was also used in anointing oil (Exodus 30v23-25) and in incense.

For one who is mortal. It is used in embalming bodies, and speaks of Jesus' death and burial in the tomb. *Its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a stone-cold tomb*. Symbolises suffering.

It a great story, but it is strange story too. It is about non-Jewish priests, but it is found only in Matthew's gospel, from written by someone who is the most Jewish of the gospel writers, concerned with how Jesus fitted into his Jewish history. The story is not mentioned in the other gospels, or in the New Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Melchior - frankincense, Caspar – gold, Balthazar – myrrh.

letters. And these are astrologers, reading events from the movement of the stars, rather than from the Law of God. You would have thought Matthew would have run a mile from this story, but he includes it.

What the story shows is interesting. As I said at the beginning, Epiphany is about the revealing of Jesus to gentiles, to non-Jews. God, independently of anyone in Israel, tells these men from a completely different place and culture and religion about the birth of Jesus. This event, that we celebrate at Christmas, of God being born as a person, God with us, revealing himself to us, a pivotal point in history, is announced to foreigners, non-believers. This is good news for everyone. God wants all people to know about Jesus. They did not have to become Jews before they were included. God seems much less concerned with defining who is in and out and we often are.

And the magi themselves were impressive. They were motivated enough to undertake a long journey in faith, based on something unprovable. The hope it offered them was enough to get them out of their normal comfortable lives, to make the effort to seek God.

They brought costly gifts to welcome the new king. And these gifts have amazing significance for the life of Jesus, as we have seen. Pointing to his divinity, his suffering and death, as well as his ultimate kingship.

They did find the baby. Not in the palace in Jerusalem where they expected him, but with the common people, with his unremarkable parents, in a normal house in Bethlehem. They still gave this baby the gifts, they still worshipped him. God spoke to them, and they went home, to their normal lives, but changed by this journey.

Let us let the same awe, the same faith and innocence, the same motivation, touch us.

Jeremy Thake

St. John & St. Stephen.

## **Matthew 2**

### **The Visit of the Wise Men**

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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.' 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 "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."

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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.' 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.