

Epiphany 2021

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.

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. ³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

Psalm 72. 10–15

- ¹⁰ The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute;
the kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring gifts.
- ¹¹ All kings shall fall down before him;
all nations shall do him service.
- ¹² For he shall deliver the poor that cry out,
the needy and those who have no helper.
- ¹³ He shall have pity on the weak and poor;
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.
- ¹⁴ He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence,
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.
- ¹⁵ Long may he live;
unto him may be given gold from Sheba;
may prayer be made for him continually
and may they bless him all the day long.

Gospel Reading: 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, 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." ' 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection:

The first witnesses to the birth of Jesus, the shepherds found the baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in the manger. What made the shepherds receptive to receive that sign? And who is it that they might represent?

Shepherds knew about social isolation, living day by day to make a living as best they could and in this way often heroically helping to serve the greater good. They lived away from dense areas of population, spending most of the days and nights outside very aware of changing seasons, of light, dark and sparkling stars and no doubt considering their place under the vastness of the sky and looking out across distant horizons.

The shepherds were told by the angels that the sign of God's bursting forth into people's lives, the coming of real hope into our daily living, and of light shining in the darkness, was present for them to see in the baby, lying in a place where the animals sheltered and were fed.

John's Gospel describes the coming of Jesus as being like God pitching his tent amongst us and moving into the neighbourhood. And this we are asked to think of as being in a very simple place which is often pictured as a stable, the manger a feeding trough, and including there, a donkey and an ox. A baby wrapped in cloth for warmth: and in his vulnerability, loved and cared for by Mary and Joseph, who will continue to love and nurture him in the years to come.

Today's Gospel reading is from Matthew and now we also think about what made the Magi receptive to follow the sign of the bright star. And to consider who they might represent.

Cosmology is the study human origins and future purpose and at the time of Jesus Magi looked for answers by observing the planets, stars and moons. Recently the conjoining in the night sky of Jupiter and Saturn made for a spectacular brightness which some referred to as the Christmas Star. The Magi then representing those who study the Universe and also those whose spirituality can be nourished by the awesome sight of the night sky and the bright lights of the stars.

In the *Star Child* play broadcast on Radio 4 on Christmas Day, the woman leading the magi on their journey spoke of there being a great silence as the response to the contemplating of the bright star of the Christmas story. And for many the singing of Silent Night, the tune and the reflecting on the words, is one way in which we confirm the value of silence as we respond to the wonder of God coming to live amongst us and being found in the vulnerability of a baby born in that simple place and worshipped by shepherds and later on worshipped by the Magi.

The Magi who had refused to be deterred by the scheming of King Herod being led in faith by a truth that they found connected them to a greater and fuller understanding of servant kingship, the kingship of Jesus.

God in and through the life of Jesus coming alongside us, pitching his tent with us and alongside all who are struggling or discouraged. God accessible to us in the vulnerable baby born in Bethlehem and drawing us into the heart of his light. With us and for us, so that we can be a community, alongside others in their place of need, alert to the needs of all life on earth and on this planet that we share, and in this way brightly shining and widening the light that bring fullness of life to all.