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**8th Jan 2023**

**Epiphany**

**The Rev’d Andy Braunston**

**Call to Worship**

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

The brightness of God’s light **shines upon all the nations.**

All are welcomed to the brightness of God’s dawn. We respond in praise.

**With our gifts, with our very selves, we worship God.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession, Forgiveness**

O Lord our God,

your glory shines as far as the east is from the west, from the north to the south,

so that all people may see and be radiant,

so that every heart might thrill and rejoice.

Guide us on our journey in Christ. Overwhelm us with the joy of your presence.

God of justice, we confess that our actions are evil

whenever we remain passive while others are oppressed;

whenever we guard our own prosperity at the expense of those who are poor;

or when we ignore the cries of those in need of help.

Forgive us, we pray, for hiding in the darkness of this world

more than loving the light of your righteousness made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Judge us with mercy, we pray, and extend your grace to us.

Strengthen our faithfulness to you and to all who are precious in your sight.

We pray in the name of Christ, our Light. Amen.

Friends, God is for us and not against us.

For that very reason God sent the Son into the world—not to condemn the world,

but that the world might be saved through him.

We declare the good news of the Gospel:

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and set free to live a new life in him.

**All Age Introduction**

This is a good opportunity to use the sense of smell. We don’t normally use incense in worship in the URC but why not this Sunday. Your local church supply, or New Age, shop are places where you could buy some frankincense and some myrrh. You will need some charcoals, something to place them in like a metal bowl, heat proof mat, and a couple of forks to hold the charcoal.

Hold the charcoal in the light of a candle flame before the service starts, if you put the edge of the charcoal in – provided you’ve not opened the packaging until now – it should light easily. You’ll hear some spitting and see it start to glow. Once it’s taken, gently wave it through the air – the oxygen helps it burn. This is why thuribles are swung in some churches to encourage the charcoal to burn. I suggest you light three and then place them next to each other in a metal bowl or can and leave this on a mat to one side.

At the appropriate point in the service drop about half a teaspoon to a teaspoon of incense grains onto the charcoals. Then ask people about the gifts the magi bought and what they represent. They’ll know about gold and that it’s a gift fit for a king. Suggest you haven’t brought any gold today but you hope for some in the offering. Show the people the unused grains. Frankincense is made from the resin/gum from a shrub growing in Arabia, Somalia and Ethiopia. It gives off a sweet smell and has been used for millennia in worship. Frankincense was used in the Temple in Jerusalem and in Roman pagan worship. It carried over into the worship of the Church and the joke is for many years it was used to stop the smell of the faithful offending the noses of the clergy! Now it is used in Catholic and Orthodox worship and in many Anglican churches. It represents prayers rising to God. (By now the smoke should be going. If you’ve some heat proof gloves you could take the bowl around the congregation so they can get a better smell. Beware of outbreaks of Protestant Cough at this point.

Now put some grains of myrrh onto the charcoal. And set to one side. Again, you don’t need much as the smell is awful! Ask what they know of myrrh. Like frankincense it is made from the resin/gum from a different shrub growing in the same areas. It has been used in medicine as an ointment, can be used in toothpaste (!) but in the ancient world was used to anoint the bodies of the dead. It has a bitter smell – the hymn We Three Kings has the line “myrrh I bring, it’s gathering gloom, breaths a sense of gathering gloom”. Take the bowl around and allow people to smell the bitter smoke.

Gold was a gift fit for a king, frankincense a gift fit for a priest, myrrh for a sacrificial victim. Jesus was all these things in his life and the magi recognised this in their gifts.

**Prayer of Illumination**

O God of wonder, as that ancient star rose and guided the magi,

illuminating the place where Jesus lay,

so now may the light of your Holy Spirit shine in our hearts and minds

as the Word is read and proclaimed.

Guide us again to Christ, and direct us in new paths of faithfulness.

In Christ we pray. Amen.

Readings

*Isaiah 60:1-6* | *St Matthew 2:1-12*

**Notes For A Sermon**

Today we mark the festival of Epiphany which fell on Friday. It’s the end of the Christmas season and marks the visit of those mysterious magi who came to pay homage to Jesus. In some cultures Epiphany is when gifts are given. In an older age here it marked the end of the Christmas season – the 12 days of Christmas – and is still observed as the day to take down the decorations. Sadly as we start to hear Christmas music in late November by the time we get to Boxing Day we no longer want to hear the carols or seasonal music and by this time of year we’re rather ready for it all to come to an end.

Epiphany speaks of the mystery which is at the heart of Christian faith. Everything about this story is mysterious – the magi, the gifts, the dream telling the Magi to escape as well as the dream Joseph had to flee into Exile. These little mysteries point to a bigger mystery – that God reveals God’s own self to those who search – and those who search may be rather different to who we imagine.

smaller mysteries…

*the magi*

Little is know of the magi who come to visit Jesus. We think of them as Kings as the Psalmist, in Psalm 72 foretold Kings coming to worship the Messiah yet there is nothing in the New Testament to indicate they were kings.

There is nothing, either, to indicate there were three of them – just that they brought three gifts.

Some English translations render them as magi, others as wise men. Magi is closer to the Greek but is an odd English word. It is where we get the word magician from. We might call them sages or seers or, perhaps, astrologers as they looked at the sky and interpreted the movement of the stars; they found meaning by looking at the vast heavens. Seeing a new star they determined to look at ancient Jewish texts and discerned the birth of a new king. It is all very mysterious; we don’t know where they were from, where they went to after their visit. We don’t know their religion – though the term “from the East” indicates they were beyond Judaism and followers of some pagan religion or religions.

*the gifts*

And then we have those odd gifts. The old joke says that wise women would have bought nappies, sterile bottles and knitted baby clothes. Instead the guys brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold may have been useful – especially as the family had to flee to Egypt and live there for some years whilst Herod lived. Gold, then and now, is a gift fit for a king. Easy to see the meaning there. Frankincense spoke, and speaks, of worship. It was used in the Temple and is still used in Anglican, Orthodox and Episcopal churches. This resin from a bush gives off a sweet smell when heated and represents prayers rising to heaven. For many of us it holds no particular meaning but for some of us the smell triggers both memory and spirituality. It speaks of spirituality, tradition, and mystery. Myrrh, similarly a resin from tree bark, is harder to explain. It’s still used in medicine but in the ancient world was a perfume used to anoint the bodies of the dead. It’s a gift that speaks of sacrifice. A very odd thing to give to a baby. The gifts show the magi discerned what Jesus was – king and priest and sacrifice. Heaven knows what Mary and Joseph made of it all.

*the dreams*

And then we have the dreams. Matthew puts three dreams at the start of his Gospel. Gabriel tells Joseph not to divorce Mary, to accept her child and to name him Jesus. Later he warns Joseph to leave Bethlehem before Herod’s troops arrive. In today’s reading the magi are told in a dream not to return to Herod as they had promised and to leave the country by another route. In the ancient world dreams were seen as a way of God, or the gods, speaking to us.

*a deeper mystery*

The mystery is in who finds God. At the time the Jewish people saw themselves as the Chosen People, a Light to the Gentiles and the only worshippers of God. They could, at times, get a little smug as they were the chosen ones, they didn’t worship idols, they knew there was only One True God whereas the pagans were dreadful, lived lives of moral depravity and worshipped anything and everything. You can see echoes of this thinking in Paul’s letter to the Romans – in his first chapter when he’s using this rhetoric to make some points and turn the tables on his Jewish readers. However, here we have three pagans who didn’t keep kosher, who may have worshipped other gods, who interpreted the stars for heaven’s sake, finding God. These were not the people who should be finding the Messiah. Herod had the chief priests in his pocket, they were learned in the Law, they should have known but they didn’t. Instead the outsider did. Just as Jesus should have been born in a palace but wasn’t, so the Jewish establishment should have discerned the Messiah’s birth but didn’t.

Religious folk can be very odd about who finds God. We tend to want to keep God to ourselves – of course we want people to come to church and find God on our terms but we’re a bit nervous if people find God who shouldn’t do. We want people to become like us then find God yet Epiphany is about outsiders finding God and finding Him using their own learning. The magi hadn’t, as far as we know, read the Bible. They weren’t Jewish, they weren’t part of the religious establishment but they found God, and made extravagant gestures of love to Him when they found him.

We need to remember that God is always seeking to draw people to Himself, always seeking to reveal himself to those who don’t yet know him. He may use the Church, but he will use whatever He will – art, music, other faiths, to help people seek and find him. Our task is to help not hinder God’s self-revelation, to help people enter into the mystery that is God.

**A Post Sermon Prayer**

O Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives:

give us discernment to hear your word,

grace to relinquish our tasks,

and courage to follow empty handed, wherever you may lead;

that the voice of your Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, Amen.

*Janet Morely*

**Intercessions**

Gracious and Holy God, your eternal purposes, revealed to us in Christ Jesus,

show that your love extends to the ends of the earth,

and stretches far beyond our own imaginings.

We thank you for such expansive love and for the rich variety of ways

you make yourself known among us.

We pray for the Church,

too often afraid of the rich diversity you have designed,

too often timid in our proclamation of the Gospel

before the rulers and powers of this world.

Strengthen us in our witness, we pray.

Fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit that we may be bold and confident

through faith in Christ.

Heal divisions within the Church so that we live truly as members of the same body.

Cast out jealousies and suspicions until we become sharers in the gospel promise.

We pray for people in positions of power in our country and throughout the world.

May they govern with justice and compassion.

Give to all who control economic and military might

wisdom to choose the common good over personal or political gain.

We pray for people who have little power according to the world’s measure of power.

Defend the cause of the poor;

deliver those in need, put an end to oppression;

and save the lives of everyone in harm’s way this day.

May all victims of violence find their lives redeemed by your love and care.

We pray for people who are seeking you this day,

or searching for new meaning and purpose for their lives.

Guide and direct them in their spiritual journey.

Give them the vision to see signs of your promise,

the wisdom to discern between what is false and what is true,

and courage and curiosity in all their searching.

May the joy of Christ surprise them and lead them to a place of welcome.

We pray for those we know and love….

Finally, we pray for those overwhelmed by personal darkness today:

the one bowed down in grief;

the one overcome by depression;

the one who is unemployed or in economic trouble;

the one who is struggling with illness or recovery.

We pray for those who are estranged from one another

and for people undergoing stressful transitions.

Send the light and peace of your presence, O God,

and send us, too, that we might bear the light of Christ

and so bring companionship and hope by your grace.

Accept our prayers, Loving God,

for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ,

in whose name we pray.

*(unknown source)*

**Blessing**

Now, the song of the angels is stilled,

now, the star in the sky is gone,

now, the kings and princes are home,

now, the shepherds are back with their flock,

now, the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,

to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, and to make music in the heart.

So go now and attend to the work of Christmas,

and the blessing of Almighty God,

Eternal Majesty, Incarnate Word, and Abiding Spirit

be with you all now and always, Amen.

*based on words by words by Howard Thurman*

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| The First Noel |  | *323* |  | 644 |
| Hail to the Lord’s Anointed *(try it to Ellacombe)* | 127 | 474\*  | 228 | 204 |
| Angels from the Realms of Glory | 163 | 324 | 190 | 35 |
| Gaudete – see below |  |  |  |  |
| We Three Kings of Orient Are  |  |  |  | 740 |
| As With Gladness | 184 | 326 | 224 | 39 |
| Brightest and Best  | 183 | 327 | 227 | 65 |
| Wise Men, They Came To Look For Wisdom |  | 328 |  |  |

\* The Epiphany verse is missing: Kings shall fall down before him,/ and gold and incense bring;/and nations shall adore him,/his praise all people sing;/for he shall have dominion / o’er river, sea, and shore, / far as the eagle’s pinion/or dove’s light wing can soar.

**The medieval hymn Gaudete** is good fun to sing but tricky to play. It might be better a Capella if you have strong singers. The music, the tune is called *Piae Cantiones* and dates from 1582, is here (with the original Latin words) <http://www.servicemusic.org.uk/anthem/gaudete.pdf>

but some newer words by the Catholic composer Bob Hurd are below. You’ll need a OneLicence to reproduce them.

**Gaudete**

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Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus,

ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete.

Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus,

ex Maria Virgine, Guadete.

(Translation: Rejoice, rejoice, Christ is born of the Virgin Mary)

Nature marvels at the sight,

angels sing the glory,

God becomes a little child,

shepherds tell the story

2: Hail Mary, ever blest,

Mother of the promise.

By your word the word the Word made flesh

came to dwell among us.

3: With the wise men from the East,

with the stars of Heaven,

with the shepherds and the sheep,

come, let us adore Him.

4: Now is born Emmanuel,

now is come salvation.

Sing we all noel, noel!

Sing in exultation!