****

**Epiphany 2024**

**The Revd**

**Andy Braunston**

**Note**

Today many churches celebrate the Epiphany, the visit of the mysterious magi who visited the infant Jesus bringing exotic presents. Epiphany fell yesterday but most churches will observe it today. It concludes the Christmas season but opens a whole way of thinking about revelation. The wise ones represent other, non-Jewish, cultures who came to worship Jesus – a foreshadowing of how the Gospel would be spread around the world and gives us a chance of how we might reveal Jesus to those we know and love.

**Call To Worship**

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we come to Your crib today to pay you homage. **Hail to the Lord’s anointed!**

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we long for your reign on earth to be fully known. **Hail to the Lord’s anointed!**

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we yearn for Your justice making the weak strong, turning our darkness into light. **Hail to the Lord’s anointed!**

Jesus, Messiah, and Saviour, we fall before You and offer You our gifts, knowing that in Your many names, we know you as love. **Hail to the Lord’s anointed!**

Works best if followed by the hymn *Hail to the Lord’s Anointed* (try it to Ellacombe)

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

Since the beginning, O Ancient of Days,

You have called people to follow.

Inspiring humanity with moon and star, sun and rain,

majestic mountain, fast flowing river,

and with the very mystery of life itself,

You have called people to be Your own.

In the simplicity of Your manger, Lord Jesus,

You drew people to Yourself;

awe filled shepherds and exotic magi came to worship

and to see in You the hopes and fulfilment of all their yearnings.

Like a light in the gloom, O Holy Spirit,

we see Your brilliance, feel our hearts warmed

and gain a sense of direction and purpose.

Forgive us, O Most High,

when we fail to see you in Creation,

and so exploit and misuse the abundance of life

with which we share the planet.

Help us to learn, soon, O God,

how to live in harmony with nature.

Forgive us Lord Jesus,

when we seek fulfilment in other things and turn away from You.

Teach us, quickly, O Christ

that our restless hearts will only find their rest in You.

Forgive us, Most Holy Spirit,

when we look for warmth and purpose

in strange places instead of in Your all-powerful love.

Forgive us, and give us time to change! Amen.

Hear good news: God’s love seeks us out at great cost.

When we turn back to God we find that, like a father,

God runs towards us with arms open wide in welcome.

Like a mother, God surrounds us with fierce love.

Like a rock upon which we stand,

God gives us a secure foundation for life.

So accept the forgiveness on offer, learn to forgive others,

and find the strength to forgive yourself. Amen.

**All Age Activity**

You will need something golden, some incense, some charcoal (your local Catholic or Anglican church might be prepared to let you have some) and a sturdy metal bowl or jam jar lid to place it on (and place it on a heat proof mat!) and some myrrh. Myrrh and Frankincense can be purchased on line and often in new age shops. Before the surface take two charcoal tablets and gently heat them. Tongs are great for this but you could hold them with two forks – hold them like chop sticks in one hand. Use a candle to heat them, after a while you will see the charcoal light – you’ll hear a little hissing sound and the charcoal glows. Gently blow on the charcoal (turn away from the candle first!) to encourage the burning (that’s why thuribles are swung to feed the charcoals some more air) Then carefully place the charcoal on the tin/metal and place in church. Provided the notices don’t go on for too long these will still be warm enough for later. If you can get hold of a thurible this will work better for the show and tell. Have a heat proof vessel ready to put the stuff in to take out.

In the All Age section ask about what people know about gold – this is an easy one. You could show them something golden or say that the youngsters can look in the collection later on for gold!

Place a few grains of frankincense on the charcoal and ask what if anything people know about incense. You can say it’s used in Biblical times to represent prayers rising to heaven, it was used in Jewish and pagan worship and has been used in the Church for much of our history. Nowadays our Orthodox, Catholic and some Anglican sisters and brothers use it. By now there should be a sweet smoke coming from the charcoal. If you’ve got a thurible you can take it round the congregation, if not ask the younger ones to come and smell it but tell them not to touch! Explain that frankincense comes from a bush in Somalia and Ethiopia and is the resin that’s produced from the shrub which gives off a smell when burned. By now I suspect the congregation may have an outbreak of Protestant cough.

Place a few grains of myrrh on the other charcoal. Explain this too comes from the resin of a bush. Ask if anyone knows what myrrh is used for now? Evidently it’s used in medicine and toothpaste. In Jesus time it was a precious substance used to make into an ointment to anoint the bodies of the dead. By now the smell should be apparent. It’s horrible. It can be great fun to take this round the congregation in a thurible…Protestant cough might give way to some disgust. Remind them of the line in We Three Kings about “Myrrh I bring…it’s bitter perfume.” Have an assistant put all the material into the heat proof vessel and take outside.

Gold was given by the wise ones to represent Jesus’ kingship. Frankincense was given to represent the idea he is a priest. Myrrh given to symbolise death and sacrifice.

**Prayer for Illumination**

Break open our hearts, O God,

that as we hear Your word read, sung,

proclaimed and pondered,

we may see Your truth revealed,

learn to share it, and be a light to the nations. Amen.

**Readings**

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

**Sermon Notes**

Most of us don’t see the stars very often. Public safety concerns led to street lighting, we navigate by SatNavs – which use human made heavenly vessels, and the night skies seem rather peripheral to our concerns. Our forebears, however, realised that the stars were vital to navigate by. The movements of the moon, regular as clockwork, timed seasons, and holidays – Muslim and Jewish festivals, like Easter, depend on calculations from lunar calendars. Most of us are unaware if it’s a full or new moon, most of us can’t see the stars and almost all of us wouldn’t know how to navigate by stars even if our lives depended on it. Now the stars are studied by scientists or astrologers but, for most of us, they are a treat when on holiday in an area with little light pollution. Our readings today, however, were not written in the modern era, but in the ancient world where the light of the sun by day and the moon by night were vital for travel and where the movement of the stars were imbued with meaning in ways they aren’t now. The Magi saw a new star, found meaning in that, realised it had something to do with the Jewish people and came to see. Our Old Testament reading rejoices at a time of gloom, despondency, and despair – these pesky prophets always demand we look at things in a different light.

This part of Isaiah was written as the exiles returned to Jerusalem. Years of longing fulfilled, tales of Jerusalem passed down from parents and grandparents to those who had never seen it were now seen as rather lacking. The city was in ruins, those left behind when the city was sacked 70 years beforehand didn’t have the skills or resources to run a city, teach the young, or see to the spiritual nurture of the people – those that did were taken into Exile after all. So, the city stood in ruins with incompetent and corrupt officials in charge, the crumbling buildings being a startling image of a crumbling government - and who says the Bible is irrelevant to our contemporary concerns? Worse, the exiles who had kept faith and hope alive in captivity were faced with a religiously apathetic population. Believing they had been punished by God’s own hands, unable to worship in a sacked Temple, the people had drifted in their faith and religious practice. In these ruins the prophet tells the people to rejoice! In this despondency the prophet said that light would shine on the city and the people for its time had come! Despite the crumbling buildings and government kings would come bearing gifts. Of course, Matthew saw the fulfilment of this prophecy in Jesus but for the people of the time it gave hope in a dark place, hope like a light shining in the gloom, a light to guide like the stars of night.

Matthew and the writer of this part of Isaiah saw that in God’s light new truth would be revealed. Outsiders would come to Jerusalem with the wealth of the nations and the abundance of the sea, exotic commodities would be brought, and Jerusalem would be the centre of trade and prosperity. Those outside the Jewish faith would marvel at the wonders God had wrought for Jews and give thanks to the Most High. In Matthew we see this idea worked out in a very different way to that which the Isaiah passage’s author had imagined. The wealth of the nations does not come to the poor stable in Bethlehem. The glory of Jerusalem is not renewed. Hope is not found in a renewed national life. Instead, Matthew has the nations, in the form of these Magi, bringing prophetic gifts and seeing God’s light in a sleeping child. God’s glory is revealed – just as Isaiah prophesied – but not in might, riches, trade, and fame but in the weakness and frailty of a small child. God’s glory is found on the edge, in the backwater of Bethlehem not at the centre of things in the royal palace – of course that’s where the Magi first went. Later in the story Matthew shows us God’s glory again at work on the edge – on Jerusalem’s rubbish tip at Golgotha.

The Church names this celebration Epiphany – meaning revelation. Here we remember the revelation of Jesus to those who were outside the Jewish faith – to these exotic worshippers who represent all of us who worship and who came to faith from outside Judaism. God’s universal longing for is seen in these visitors and their gifts.

They also represent some more contradictions that we wrestle with. Gold is given, a gift for a king. Yet kings sit on thrones not their poor mother’s lap. Kings sleep in luxurious beds not a feeding trough for cattle. Kings have courtiers not animals to attend them. Frankincense is given, a gift for a priest. Yet priests don’t live in stables. Priests advise the mighty not flee into exile for fear of a tyrant’s rage. Priests have respect not scorn. And who gives myrrh to a baby? Myrrh still used in medicine but then mainly used to anoint the bodies of the dead. One wonders what Mary made of that gift; perhaps a thank you and wondering what they might be able to sell it for.

Yet this child given these strange gifts grows up. This child worshipped by Gentiles is schooled in his faith and his scriptures and learns to preach and draw new meaning from ancient texts. This child lauded by king priests champions the poor and the oppressed. This king has no wealth, no armies and no power yet changes the fate of peoples and nations. This priest has more questions than easy answers and inspires women and men throughout the ages to worship and live radical lives. This sacrifice shows us the power of love which defeats all that is evil, even if the defeat involves pain and humiliation.

What is revealed to us in these stories, and the life that follows, is a way of living and loving that still challenges us, that still makes us wonder, that still captivates, enthuses, annoys, and puzzles us. We long to have power and authority, for people to listen, for our old privileges, status and numbers to come back but the revelation we have to deal with is that power is found in weakness, victory found in defeat and sacrifice as the Way of the Cross.

**Affirmation of Faith**

We believe that, in great love, God has ensured that all people can know and find the truth. The heavens declare God’s glory, the sky above reveals God’s life. **Amen! We believe.**

We believe that, through precious law, brave prophets and lasting wisdom the Eternal One raised up the Jewish people to be a light to the nations and to embody the truth of righteous living. **Amen! We believe.**

We believe that, in the fullness of time God’s own self became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. He proclaimed freedom to those held captive, liberation to the oppressed, and good news to the poor. For this he was opposed. For this he suffered an unjust trial and execution as a criminal. For three days he laid in the tomb and evil thought it had triumphed. But the Most High vindicated Jesus and raised him to new life; a life that is promised to us all. **Amen! We believe.**

We believe that the Holy Spirit frees us from all that holds us captive, drives us out in loving service of others and emboldens us to challenge injustice. In the Church the Holy Spirit teaches us to love, helps us encounter the Lord Jesus at the font and the table and refines us as committed disciples. **Amen! We believe.**

**Offering**

The wise ones bought gifts to Jesus, each with a symbolic meaning – gold to acclaim him as king, frankincense to recognise his priesthood, myrrh realising he’d be slain like a sacrifice. All gifts have meaning – they might mean love, obligation, thanks, or a debt being repaid. We are told in Scripture to give, and to give cheerfully. We give to a range of charities and good causes but at this point we give to , and give thanks for the work of the Church. Here in Church we find peace. Here we find balm for our souls as we are fed by Christ’s own hand, taught God’s Word and have our rough edges knocked off as we are built into community. We give in a variety of ways – in the plate using cash or envelopes, directly to the bank, with a legacy. What matters is we give. And so now we give thanks for all that has been given:

Giving God,

we return to You something of what You have given us.

Help us to use these gifts wisely;

knowing that, in all things,

You desire us to reveal Your generous love that reaches all. Amen.

**Intercessions**

God of the stars,

we gaze at the heavens in awe,

we see the moon and the planets,

satellites orbiting the earth,

twinkling light from millions of miles away,

we wonder at how the ancients navigated by these lights,

and saw meaning in their movement.

We gaze and wonder if humanity is alone in the universe

or if, in some far off corner, You’ve got other civilizations,

other worlds that You care about.

We pray today for all who study the stars,

who seek to explore our solar system,

and to increase our knowledge of the vast abyss of space.

*pause*

God of the stable,

we gaze at the nativity scene and struggle to take it all in.

God in the dirt; animals attending like courtiers,

smelly shepherds and exotic magi;

it’s all too much for us really.

We wonder at the danger of it all,

the cruelty of the tyrant, the protection of Joseph, the trust of Mary

and we give thanks.

We pray today for all who are living in danger,

refugees and asylum seekers, the poor and hungry,

those on the edge of our societies

to whom the wealth never seems to trickle down,

those struggling to pay their rent, mortgage or power bills.

*pause*

God of the Scriptures,

we gaze at the magi and wonder they trusted in ancient words

and clear dreams.

We are horrified that those who knew Your word turned to murder,

whilst outsiders turned to worship.

We thank You for the ways in which You speak to us,

through ancient words and contemporary dreams,

through the Church and deep in our own hearts.

We pray today for those who search for You,

in Scripture, stable and star,

that You may be found

and that we may be signposts pointing to You.

*pause*

God of star, stable and Scripture, we pray now for all those we love and worry about

*longer pause*

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught saying Our Father…

**Blessing**

Now the song of the angels is stilled,

the star in the sky is gone, the magi are home,

the shepherds are back with their flock,

so 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.

Go now and attend to Christmas’ work

and the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ***or*** Eternal Majesty, Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit

be with you as you work

now and always. Amen.

|  |
| --- |
| Hymn Suggestions |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Hail to the Lord’s Anointed – this works very well to Ellacombe | 127 | 474\* | 228 |  |
| Angels from the Realms of Glory | 163 | 324 | 190 |  |
| The First Nowell |  | 323 |  |  |
| We Three kings |  |  |  |  |
| As With Gladness | 184 | 326 | 224 |  |
| Brightest and Best are the Sons (Stars) of the Morning | 188 | 327 | 227 |  |

\* CH4 omits the Epiphany verse and you may wish to add it:

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.

Other Ideas

If you have no organist Rob Charles at All Saints Church, Oystermouth is pleased for churches to use his recordings on YouTube. Here is him playing [*Epiphany Hymn (Brightest and Best)*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym_YhyMGfO0)

Handel’s *Sarabande*is a good tune to end with. There are lots of examples of it on YouTube. You will need a licence if you are livestreaming.