

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 5th January 2025
Epiphany
The Revd Andy Braunston

Note

We explore, in worship today, themes of light shining in the darkness, mysterious visitors bringing the Holy Family even more mysterious gifts, and consider how a people struggling in exile and defeat were enlightened with God's glorious light. Our readings explore themes of light and dark as we focus on Jesus whose light radiates in the gloom of our world. Let's worship God together.

Call to Worship

In the gloom of our world, when all seems desperate and dangerous: **we arise and shine for our light has come!** In the hopeless situations that surround us, the news that terrifies, the nations at war, and truth itself is silenced: **we arise and shine for our light has come!** When gifts have strings attached, when estrangement is part of life, and when dangerous leaders tempt us to despair: **we arise and shine for our light has come!** So, we arise and shine, for the glory of the Lord is upon us; our hearts will thrill and rejoice as the work of Christmas continues – to shine the Lord's light in our darkened world.

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We come to worship You, O God, with obedience and humility,
as we adore Your most holy name.

We lay our burdens at Your feet, not just for our own good,
but to allow space for You to guide our steps;
that we may relieve the world's pain.

As we come and see the beauty of Your holiness,
we become conscious of the ugliness of our sin;
we love the gloom more than the light,
the sorrow more than the joy, lies more than truth.

We are conscious of our slender wealth against the riches of Your grace.
Give us time, O God, to appreciate Your tender love,
to live Your beautiful truth, and make our lives temples to Your glory.

Give us the grace to forgive others when they hurt us,

the beauty to forgive ourselves and leave our guilt behind,
and the faith to trust in Your forgiveness
which changes and challenges us. Amen.

Introduction

Our reading from Isaiah is set during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. It was a time of great gloom and despondency when the very future of the Jews as an independent nation was in grave doubt. Yet, in the midst of the gloom, there's news of recovery – a recovery that would bring nations and their rulers to pay tribute to Israel and bring costly gifts. Our Gospel reading tells of the mysterious visitors “from the East” who bring costly gifts to a peasant child believing him to be a king. Pagan outsiders perceive what God is up to long before those who should have known what was going on. Let's pray and then we'll hear ancient and contemporary words as we think about those readings and how we might find them useful now.

Prayer for Illumination

Come with speedy support O Spirit,
to give us songs for sighing,
that, as we hear You in ancient and contemporary words,
You might turn our gloom into light,
and remind us that we are precious in Your sight. Amen

Reading

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

All Age Activity

You will need some charcoal to burn incense on – you might find your local Catholic or Anglican Church might let you have some, frankincense and myrrh. Myrrh and frankincense resin can be purchased online but, again, your local Catholic or Anglican church might let you have a few grains of frankincense. You don't need much if you wish to avoid an outbreak of Protestant cough. Before the surface you need to heat the charcoal. This is best done by holding it with metal tongs or forks and using a lighter or a candle. A lighter tends to burn hotter. Gently wave the charcoal until it sparkles then pop it in a metal dish and cover it, place it in church on a heat proof mat! In the service put a few grains of frankincense on the charcoal then explain it's a resin from a bush found in Somalia, Yemen and Ethiopia which, when heated, gives off a sweet sent. It's been used in worship since ancient times – and was used in the Jewish Temple and in many Christian churches today. It's described as being part of the worship of heaven. You may, with heat proof gloves, like to move the metal plate around to share the incense and let people smell it. Then do the same with the myrrh resin. This is also from the gum of a bush found in similar places but it was used to denote a sacrifice. It's used in medicine and some toothpaste today but was, in the form of an salve, used to anoint the bodies of the dead. Take

the plate around and see if the congregation agree with you that it is, indeed, a bitter perfume with breathes as sigh of gathering gloom.

Protestant worship doesn't often involve the sense of smell in the way that Orthodox, Catholic and some Anglican churches do so it's good to experiment. You might want to look at the idea of prayer rising to God as incense rises in the room; you might ask if the smell (of frankincense) is an aid to prayer – does going into a church with the smell in the background evoke images of prayer and spirituality?

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

The Jews, at the time this part of Isaiah was proclaimed were a people without a land, a nation whose capital lay in ruins, and a tribe deported to a faraway country which didn't understand their language, faith, rituals or identity. The political and religious elite had been deported to Babylon and their homeland, temple, houses, fields, and trades were left in ruin. How could they sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Of course, these ancient tragedies have a contemporary ring as Palestinians exist without their own land, with their heritage, faiths, and very existence threatened by an expansionist Israeli state. History repeats itself as few listen. The writer of those prophecies from Isaiah, though, does not offer comfort for the bad times but hope in a different future. A future where the poverty of defeat and deportation would be replaced with the nations bringing their riches – all that gold and frankincense – to Israel. Kings would, instead of laughing, pay homage. The nations that once dominated Israel would now pay homage to it. The sea to the west and the lands to the east will pour in their wealth. No wonder the writer told the readers to arise for their light had come. The light, however, wasn't for Israel alone. This isn't a passage where Israel can laugh at the poor benighted pagans as they come to bring homage. Instead, Israel's light has a purpose – nations would come to the light, kings to Israel's dawn. Throughout the Old Testament God uses the most unlikely people – often pagans – to achieve his purposes. There's Ruth the pagan woman in Jesus' lineage, there's Rehab the sex worker who sided with God's people – also in Jesus' genealogy. Then there's Cyrus the pagan ruler who freed the Jewish people. It took some time for the biblical writers to understand but God was God of all the nations not just of Israel. There's a growing awareness of it in various Old Testament texts – after all, humanity was to be blessed through God's covenant with Abraham and Israel saw itself as a light to the gentiles.

St Matthew

For Christians it's when the Isaiah text is paired with our passage from St Matthew's Gospel that we can see these themes more clearly. In our Gospel passage we see pagan priests come to worship the new-born Jewish king. We know very little about the magi – the name itself might mean "Persian priest or sorcerer". By the time of Darius the Great the term magi was used to denote a Zoroastrian priest or earlier Iranian religions. They were thought to practice magic – by which was meant astronomy, astrology and alchemy.

They were thought to have esoteric knowledge. Now we might see them as astrologers, but they were more than that; they not only discerned meaning in the stars they were seekers after wisdom – even wisdom beyond their own faith. We are used to the term “kings” from the Psalm, the hymn *Hail to the Lord’s Anointed* and, *We Three Kings*. Yet the term “king” isn’t in the Matthew passage. “Wise Men” is a rather sanctified version of magi – which should probably be translated as sorcerer or magician. Maybe that’s a bit too Harry Potter like for contemporary tastes. Yet these pagan priests came to acknowledge the Light of the World. Herod’s people, who should have known what was going on, hadn’t got a clue. The pagan outsiders did. Matthew, instead of having pagan nations coming to pay tribute to Israel, has pagan priests worshipping the Jewish messiah. Instead of the riches of east and west pouring into Israel, the sorcerers bring valuable gifts full of meaning: gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for a sacrifice. No doubt the gifts were useful during the Holy Family’s own exile. Even in his infancy, Jesus was for all people – Jew and gentile. Jesus draws all people to him – sorcerers from the East, the Syrophenician woman from the north, Egyptians from the South met him in exile, Romans from the West listened to him and, of course, Jews from all around followed him. This is the moment when the Light of the World is revealed to humanity. In Jesus Matthew sees fulfilment of the ancient destiny of the Jewish people to be a light to the nations. Through Jesus God invites all to bathe in the light, to change the world, and to feast together.

Weaving the Threads

We live in a world which isn’t always bathed in light. In these gloomy days of winter, it’s easy to think of situations of gloom and evil in our world: the war in Ukraine drags on and we’ve no idea how Mr Trump will seek to change things. Israel still pummels Gaza, makes delivery of aid nearly impossible, and some members of the Israeli Cabinet are determined to annexe at least part of Gaza for colonization; again Mr Trump’s intentions are not clear but he’s appointed people to high office who seem to uncritically support Israel’s ambitions. In Europe we’re faced with populist leaders seeking to emulate dictators and undermine the rule of law - just as the EU, and ourselves, seek to make life for refugees more and more difficult and demeaning. As I write it’s too early to say if Syria is in the midst of liberation or on the blink of something even worse than Assad’s regime.

God’s light might be exposing the evil rather than helping us avoid it. God’s light might be seen more in the bedraggled folk trying to cross the Channel than in the churches quietly singing their hymns and avoiding the realities of the world. Like Herod’s priests many of our religious leaders go along with the status quo hoping to deflect attention from the Church’s manifold failures; best not criticise in case the press are unleashed to examine our faults! And yet the light shines from the vulnerable baby. Strength is seen in weakness. Truth is seen on the edge. The light, strength, and truth of Jesus is there, of course to comfort, but not to offer cheap grace. The light, strength and truth that Jesus shows the world is there to change it. So, this Epiphany as we think of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt we must also think of those on the move seeking safety and security and learn to help them. As we recoil from Herod’s murderous rage we think of contemporary

tyrants who don't care for their people and murder and maim more than Herod ever did and learn to oppose them. As we think of the light coming into the world, we realise the light is there not just for us in our cosy religiosity but for all to be led into truth. The light shines in our gloomy places to expose corruption and injustice. The light reminds us to shine too. God's grace not only reaches out with love, not only serves as light to lead and expose, but also demands that we act, we lead, we expose so that the light of the world is, again, embodied in us.

This prayer might encapsulate what you might wish to say:

Light of the world,
expose the hidden places of our societies,
the corruption in high office,
the murderous rage of tyrants,
the injustice hiding in plain sight,
the hatred and racism bubbling below the surface
 spilling up when dangerous men cease power.
And help us, O God, to see more clearly in Your light,
that we might act, lead, and serve as lights
which shine on You even as You shine on us. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

In the beginning God spoke **and there was light**. In the fullness of time Mary spoke **and Jesus, the light of the world was born**. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit spoke as fire, **as light in the darkness**. As God's people we seek to speak as those who **live in the light**; to expose the evil that hides in the gloom. Through works of love and mercy we speak truth **and shine in the night**.

Intercessions

Light of the World we bring You our prayers for our world dwelling in gloom and despondency. Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the world at war,
or if not at war busy preparing for it.
We pray for the people of Ukraine wondering what the New Year brings,
for the people of Gaza living ever in fear,
for the people of Israel dreaming of security,
for the people of Lebanon living on a knife edge,
for the people of Syria living with a loathed government,
and for all who live with bellicose leaders,
insecurity, and crushing poverty.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the world in turmoil,
Creation itself overheating due to human excess;
we pray for nations plagued by plastic,
for the rich who won't change their ways,
for the poor who can't change theirs.
We pray for those who lead our world
that your light will transform their hearts and minds,
that we may flourish and not perish.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the nations,
for people looking to blame the poor for the problems of the rich,
for those who idolise despots and dictators,
for those who defend democracy and our institutions,
and for all who seek to make the world kinder and gentler.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for the Church, a place where light is supposed to shine,
where people are supposed to be safe,
and where the Gospel is supposed to be shared with all.
Forgive us where we have failed, Good Lord,
give us the energy to reform,
to choose leaders who work with not over others,
and who will call us back to Your light.

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

We pray for those we know and love who are in any kind of need....

And we pray for those we don't know and those we find it hard to love....

Lighten our darkness, Lord we pray.

As we wait for Your light to shine, Your Kingdom to come,
we join with Jesus as we pray...Our Father...

Offertory

This week, perhaps more than any other, we think of gifts and giving. In times past gifts were given at Epiphany not Christmas – in memory of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh given by the wise ones. We may not have such exotic gifts to give but we have ones just

as valuable; our time, our talents and our treasure. We give in so many ways and God blessed that giving and uses it to make a difference in our world. Let's pray:

Giver of all good gifts,
we thank you for the gifts given in this congregation;
gifts of time, of talent and of treasure.
Help us to use Your gifts wisely, that Your people will flourish,
Your light shine and our world be made whole. Amen.

Holy Communion

In the beginning You spoke, Eternal One, and there was light.
You called a people as Your own to be a light to the nations.
Through precious law and audacious prophet,
You called Your people, again and again,
to follow you, seek justice, and pursue righteousness.

Hardness of heart, grumbling, and faithlessness
made Your people turn away from Your light,
and so, in the gloom they were dispersed in exile,
learning to sing Your song in a strange land.

In the gloom, however,
You shone and called Your people home,
to rebuild and repair, and shine again.
But the powers of the ages overshadowed that light,
spreading the gloom of invasion and oppression.
Yet, in the fullness of time Your light shone
on a simple peasant girl who dared to say 'yes'.
In the darkness of night Mary gave birth to Jesus,
and laid him to rest in a borrowed manger.
Adored by shepherds, acknowledged by pagan priests,
sent by murderous rage into exile to live as a refugee,
He is the Light of the World who enlightens all who follow him.

When he returned to His own land he preached, taught, and healed,
showing God's love and life to those on the edge;
he healed the sick, lifted up the oppressed, treated women as equals,
and even welcomed the despised to follow Him,
and so he was criticised,
and so he was betrayed,
and so he was tortured,
and so he was killed.
Yet You, Eternal One, did not let Him linger in the grave,
but raised Him to new life,

letting people find Him in unexpected places with unexpected people.

And now, we come to find Him here at this table,
for we remember the night when Jesus was betrayed,
when, in the simplicity of a meal,
He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to His friends saying

‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in memory of me.’
After supper He took the cup of wine, said the ancient blessing,
and, giving the cup to His disciples, said:

‘take this all of you and drink from it, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this,
whenever you drink it, in memory of me.’

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

Christ has died. Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Come now, Holy Spirit, upon these gifts of bread and wine
and set them apart from all common use, that they may be for us
the communion with the body and blood of Christ.

Gather us up into the heavenly places,
that as we eat and drink, these your gifts of creation,
we may see Jesus Himself, risen and ascended,
present here for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

As we show forth Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross,
We are united with Him and with the whole Church
on earth and in heaven.

Renew us as we present our sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and let us rejoice at the promise of His coming again in glory.

And so, we offer You, Eternal One,
our pain and our praise, our light and our darkness,
through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
knowing that all honour and glory is Yours, forever and ever, Amen.

These are the holy gifts of God, lights in the gloom,
for God’s holy people that we may shine as the sun.

Prayer after Communion

We thank You for all your gifts, Eternal God,
golden gifts that enrich us,
mysterious gifts which draw us near to You,
and even bitter gifts that are unwanted and unbidden.

Give us the grace to use all Your gifts,
that Your light will shine in the gloom,
and the world be made whole. Amen.

Blessing

Now the song of the angels is stilled, the star in the sky is gone,
the wise ones are home, and 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
and to make music from the heart.

And may God give you the strength to undertake the work of Christmas
shining divine light into the gloomy places of our world.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you all evermore, Amen.

After Howard Thurman

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
(O) Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness	187	201		529
Hail to the Lord's Anointed	127	474§	228	204
The First Nowell		323		644
We Three Kings				740
As With Gladness Men of Old	184	326	224	39
Brightest and Best	183	327	227	65
The Silent Stars Shine Down On Us			231	
Angels from the Realms of Glory	163	324	190	35
Wise Men They Came To Look for Wisdom		328		

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

§ You'll need to add the verse

Kings shall bow down before Him and gold and incense bring.
All 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.

If you are feeling adventurous Bob Chilcott's contemporary version of the mediaeval Gaudete with English verses and the original Latin chorus is great fun. You can hear it and buy the music and words [here](#) though I'd sing it a little faster!