worship notes
from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 3rd January 2027
Epiphany 2027
The Revd Andy Braunston

Call to Worship

Come leave behind your doubt and despondency,
your gloom and glumness,
kneel and adore the God who welcomes you here;
we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!

Come, lay your cares at God's feet,
bow down in awe and proclaim God's glory,
find joy for your sorrow and answer for your prayers:
we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!

With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
come and find truth in beauty and love in tenderness,
as the world's wealth pales before the wisdom of the ages:
we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!

Come and worship.

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We gather here, Eternal One,
at the start of this new year,
to bring You our thanks and our praise,
for You shine Your light upon us,
dispelling the gloom of night,
and allowing Your glory to burnish Your people,
making us a place of welcome and blessing for all people;
for this we thank You, for this we praise You.

We gather here, Lord Jesus,
at the start of this day,
to bring You our hopes and fears for this new year,
for You shower Your love on us and ask much,
and we often fail to respond.
We sing our hymns, listen to our readings,
but close our hearts and minds to Your message.
We turn away from asylum seekers and refugees,
even as we hear of Your flight into exile.

We divide the poor into deserving and deserving,
even as we read You feed the hungry.
We prefer war to peace, insecurity to security, hated to love.
Forgive us, good Lord, and give us time to turn our lives around.

We gather here, Most Holy Spirit,
as a broken people longing to be whole,
a people in shadow longing for light,
a people who know Your truth, longing to live well.
Bless us with Your presence,
that we may live as You intend,
blessed to be a blessing,
a light pointing to Your light,
reflecting Your tender beauty,
and powerful truth. Amen.

Friends, here the good news,
the forgiveness we long for is ours in Christ,
lavished upon us as a free gift,
undeserved and unbidden.
So accept that forgiveness,
and live as forgiven people.
Have the courage to forgive others,
and to forgive yourselves!

Prayer for Illumination

As we hear Your living Word, O God,
open our heats to Your glory,
pierce our gloom with Your light,
that our hearts may thrill and rejoice,
that our lives may, like incense reek of holiness. Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 60:1-6 | *Ephesians 3:1-12* | *St Matthew 2:1-12*

All Age Activity

Get some charcoal, frankincense grains, and myrrh grains. You can get these online, or in new age shops. You will also need a metal bowl and a wooden board to put the bowl on. Before the service light the charcoal – keep it until you need it in an air proof container. Hold the charcoal with tongues or two forks and light a side and gently wave it to let oxygen feed the fire. Light two or three and cover with foil with some holes in – this keeps the heat in but allows air. In the service show on a screen or have some photos of a

frankincense bush. Explain that the resin comes from making a scratch in the bark and gum oozes out. This is then hardened and when burned gives off a sweet smell. Put some grains on the charcoal as you talk. Soon smoke will rise. Incense was used in the Jewish Temple and in many churches as a symbol of prayer – it rises like our prayers to heaven. It is a sweet smell and recalls the beauty of holiness. It was given as a gift for a priest.

Place some myrrh grains on the charcoal and show them a picture of a myrrh bush. Like frankincense myrrh comes from the resin of a bush and is used in a variety of ways now including mouthwash and toothpaste, spot treatments, aromatherapy, skin care and, believe it or not, perfume. In Egypt it was used in the mummification and embalming process and was pushed into bodily cavities after the organs had been removed to preserve flesh. It was also used as a form of medicine to disinfect open wounds and, in wine, could be a sedative. It stinks. (by now this should be self-evident). In the carol We Three Kings there's a line "myrrh I bring, it's bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom." If they've had enough gloom get someone to take the bowl and board upon which it was standing out – best to have some oven gloves so they don't hurt themselves.

The magi, mysterious visitors from the east who saw meaning in the movement of stars, bought symbolic gifts; myrrh for a sacrifice, frankincense for a priest, gold for a king. We've not had time to look at gold so suggest they attend to this in the collection!

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

Benjamin D Sommer in TJSB notes the prophet uses vocabulary and ideas associated with royalty in both Biblical and ancient near east literature and, in particular with images from the Davidic dynasty including from Isaiah 11 and Psalm 72 yet the imagery is not applied to a person but to the city of Jerusalem in particular and the Jewish nation as a whole. The prophet does not seem to be looking forward to a human Messiah to liberate them but, instead, God will rule the nation directly in the future and the whole nation will enjoy royal status. R Coggins in OBC notes this is a passage about salvation where God's glory covers the saved community. John Goldingay in NIB notes the city cannot decide to shine but, instead, shines with God's reflected glory just as Moses' face shone with God's reflected glory. This light, in turn, brings other nations from their own darkness. The nations will release the people who will come back to the city bringing fabulous wealth which will be used for the worship of God. Carol J Dempsey OP in JBC21 also notes the speaker is God and Jerusalem the recipient of the message. God's glory presents itself as an overwhelming reality; glory belongs to God alone, but God chooses to share it with the city. Jerusalem will become the embodiment of God's glory; an alluring presence, a leader of nations and peoples, a beacon and banner of hope. Jerusalem is portrayed as mother and wife who will be transformed by the return of her children. The reading is traditionally set for Epiphany due to the final sentences about gold and frankincense along with the theme of God's glory being revealed to the nations. The wise ones represent the pagan nations of the world who come and worship God's glory made manifest in Christ.

All light comes from the Christ-child, a light that draws people in from the gloom. How might we apply Isaiah's prophecy of a city and people bathing in reflected glory to ourselves now? We have no glory of our own, no light comes from the Church except what is reflected from God. Just as the moon only has the reflected light of the sun so the Church can only reflect the light that is shone upon it – and try hard not to obscure it.

Ephesians

Maxine Grossman in JANT notes the purpose of Ephesians was to show the mystery of God's will that, in Christ, breaks down the "wall" of hostility between Jew and Gentile. Most of the letter reads as a sermon rather than a letter to a particular group of believers and there's scholarly debate about whether the letter was written by Paul. The letter is concerned with a new social order – Gentiles are to reject their lawlessness, Jews to reject their insularity, wives must submit to their husbands, husbands are to treat their wives kindly, children to respect their parents, parents to love their children, slaves and masters are to be respectful of each other. The "mystery" mentioned in the opening verses means a spiritual teaching revealed only to those who join a particular religion. Paul uses to describe his teaching that Gentiles too will share in the resurrection of Christ. John Gillman in JBC21 notes the passage is very personal; no longer the last of the apostles (I Cor 15:9) now Paul is the "least of all the saints" who finds meaning in his sufferings. The mystery of God – the rightful place of the Gentiles in God's plan is at the heart of this passage; he is challenging his contemporary church to be inclusive of gentiles alongside Jewish believers. The final part of the passage makes clear the role of the Church in this - to make known "the wisdom of God in its rich variety to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places". Margaret Y MacDonald in NIB notes the passage is key to the writer's authority as an interpreter of the Divine mystery. He has authority as one imprisoned for the faith and in literal captivity to the Roman authorities and also captive to Christ's power and control. Paul, as an agent of God proclaims God's work in redeeming gentile and Jew and the Church is meant to be a community of both together. J D G Dunn in OBC notes that Paul's insight was that God had desired, since the beginning, to include gentiles in His plan for salvation alongside the Jews. The Gospel was an invitation to share in the special relationship with God which the Bible showed was the special and distinctive prerogative of the Jewish people; Paul declares that now Gentiles, through Christ, are included in this invitation. As gentiles in the contemporary Church this passage has less meaning for us as the debates around the inclusion of Gentiles into God's purposes are ones, clearly, we don't doubt. We can struggle with the realisation – long denied by the Church - that the Jews are still God's people; we've been added to the people not displaced them. Paul's concern was to see God's will and glory manifest to both Jew and gentile; the passage is here today as Epiphany is the great revealing of Christ to the pagan/gentile world. The tragedy is the Church soon lost sight of its mission to be both for Jew and gentile and 2,000 years of antisemitism have taken their dreadful toll. Perhaps, however, we might read this now as asking us to ponder on who now are we to draw into God's light? Who are the outsiders now that need incorporation into God's people.

Matthew

Dale C Allison in OBC notes that whilst Jesus is born in David's city and to fulfil Jewish prophecy it is the best wisdom of the gentiles that leads the mysterious magi to come and do him homage. There's a parallel with a story in Numbers 23 where Balaam "from the east" is asked by the evil king Balak to fight against Israel but who, instead, foretells the nation's future greatness and the coming of a great ruler. Jewish tradition had Balaam as a magi and father of magi. The parallel, then, with the evil king Herod attempts to destroy Israel's true king by employing foreign magi to spy for him but who, in the end, only bring glory to Herod's rival. Allison points out the ancients believed starts to be animate objects with their own mind and will and Jews identified them with angels (cf Job 38:7). In this infancy narrative there's a foretelling of the end – Jesus' status is "king of the Jews", Jewish leaders gather against him as plans are made in secret, and his death is sought. Here a light in the sky announces Jesus' birth, at the end of the Gospel darkness at noon announces his death. Here Jesus is worshipped by pagans, at the end he's mocked by fellow Jews. Here there is rejoicing, at the end there is mourning. Aaron M Gale in JANT notes that Matthew used the title "king" of Jesus to contrast him with Herod. He sees the magi as Persian astrologers whom early Jewish readers may have seen as foolish or evil for trying to discern meaning in the movement of stars. Stephen Westerholm in NIB notes that the author wants us to respond as the magi did – with worship – even in the face of hostility and danger. For Matthew the age when the pagan nations would be drawn to the light of Jerusalem seen in our Isaiah passage finds fulfilment here as pagan magicians are drawn to the light of Christ. Ian Boxall in JBC21 notes that Matthew's readers would have seen Herod as a usurper – a puppet king of the Romans – as they'd know that Jesus was the true king. The gifts underline their non-Jewish identity (back to Isaiah) and the fact they prostrate underlines non Jewish practice. Later Christian tradition (reflected in the carol We Three Kings) sees meaning in the gifts; gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for a sacrifice. Hauerwas offers an interesting counterpoint to all these gentiles coming to worship by pointing out that the main gentle power, Rome, was entirely disinterested in events. Rome had appointed Herod as a puppet ruler and, in Rome's name, Jesus would be killed. The most significant challenge to Rome's might, prestige, power, and systems was born and died unnoticed by its own powerbrokers. Rome new how to deal with threats – co-option or kill them. Yet it didn't know how to deal with a movement which could not be killed and which took some time to coopt. Herod understood the danger straight away – a new king was a threat to the old one.

Weaving the Threads

Our Christmas celebrations conclude with Epiphany – the revelation of Christ to the gentiles. We have lost any sense of the radical nature of God's work in uniting into one people Jew and Gentile and the radical thing Paul tried to do in seeking the Church to be a place of radical encounter between two groups that would have had little to do with each other but who, he taught, found unity in Christ. Isaiah held a vision of God's glory shining on Jerusalem and that reflected glory drawing in pagan nations; an idea reworked by Matthew with the visit of the Magi. Matthew contrasts the birth and the death of Jesus

with those who should have understood what God was up to not comprehending and those who had no right to understand being amongst the first to worship. You might want to muse on who now needs to see the light of Christ reflected in the Church. You may muse that Christians who should know what's going on are often the last to understand what God is up to! How might we as a congregation reflect God's glory to those around us? How might our evangelism, practical service of others, witness and offering of worship speak of and embody the light of God's presence which draws people in from the shadows?

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 our lives 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 Russia yearning for change,
for the people of Gaza living ever in fear,
for the people of Israel dreaming of security,
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.**

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray,
and in Your great mercy
defend us from all perils and dangers of our time,
for the love of Your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
who taught us to pray for the Kingdom to come, saying.. Our Father…

Offertory

In some parts of history gifts were given on 12th Night – Epiphany – in honour of the gifts the wise men brought to the holy family. Precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were rich in meaning and symbolism even as they had a practical value. We also bring gifts – symbolic and practical. To sit and spend time with another is a gift of love; to take our turn on a rota is a gift of practical service. To give with our money either to the bank or in the collection is a tangible way of valuing what God has done for us. So many gifts are given in this congregation and so we give thanks for them all.

God of every good gift,
bless all that is given here in this congregation,
gifts of love and wisdom,
tenderness and care,
skill and money,

that, together, these gifts become
both beautiful and holy,
signs of Your coming Kingdom. Amen.

Holy Communion

Invitation

Dear friends and family in Christ,
the gospel tells us that God, by the leading of a star,
manifested the Saviour to the peoples of the earth,
and, by the power that enabled Christ
to change water into wine, made known his glory to the disciples.
Come then to the joyful feast of the Lord and be transformed.

Thanksgiving

We thank you, God, for sending a star
to guide the wise ones to the Christ child.
But, even more, we praise you for signs and witnesses
in every generation that lead us to Christ.
We thank you for the covenant made first with Israel -
promising to be Israel's light and salvation.
You made the Jewish people your people
and promised that through them
all the peoples of the world would be blessed.
We thank you for prophets who declared your Word,
for priests who made sacrifices for the sins of many,
and for kings and rulers who ruled with justice,
lifted up the poor and needy,
and defended the people from their enemies.
With the apostles, prophets, and martyrs;
with all those through the ages who have loved the Lord Jesus Christ;
and with all who strive to serve him on earth here and now,
we join our voices in offering praise
to the God of loving power and powerful love.

Holy, holy, holy, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory,
Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,
Hosanna in the highest!

Memory

With the coming of Jesus,
the covenant with Israel was expanded and confirmed.
Through Christ, the gates of salvation have been thrown open.
Just as the Magi were welcomed at the cradle of the Christ child,
so God welcomes all strangers and those in need
into the covenant of blessing.
Jesus Christ offered food to the hungry and water to the thirsty,
shelter to the wanderer and justice to the oppressed,
friendship to the lonely and kinship to the faithful.
Jesus forgave sins, preached good news,
and filled all people with the hope of new life.
Jesus took upon himself the full consequences of our sinfulness -
even the agony of abandonment by God -
in order that we might be spared.
But our Lord could not be held by the power of death.
Jesus appeared to his followers,
triumphant from the grave, in newness of life.
He has shown us his hands and feet in order
that we might know that the one who was crucified
is the Lord and Saviour of the world.

Institution

Before knowing the agony of sorrow and death,
Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed,
took bread and blessed it, gave thanks and broke it,
shared it with his companions, and said,

“This is my body, which is for you.
Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same manner, he took the cup, blessed it, and said,

“Drink from this, all of you.
This cup is the new covenant in my blood;
do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith

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

Epiclesis

God of wisdom and light, send your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon this bread and wine.

As we come together to eat at your table,
we offer ourselves to you
in praise and thanksgiving for your mighty acts.

Doxology

Through Christ, all glory and honour are yours, O Most High,
with the Holy Spirit in the holy Church, now and forever. Amen.

The Worship Source Book 2nd Edition, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship | Faith Alive Christian Resources | Baker Books.

Post Communion Prayer

As sages from the east offered you their best,
so may we honour you, O Christ,
with our highest visions and finest energies.

As you turned the water to wine at Cana,
so come to your Church
and teach us to change human tears to joyful song.

As you were baptized to fulfil all righteousness,
so may your Church humbly do your will.

As you gave light to those who followed you on earth,
so be our light as we follow you
on city streets or country roads.
Be revealed among us in power, in Word, in sacrament,
and in places where we live and work.
Glory be to you, O Christ, now and forever. Amen.

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Blessing

Now the song of the angels is stilled,
the star in the sky is gone,
the magi are back home,
and the shepherds are back with their flocks,
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 the people,
to make music in the heart,
so may God give you the grace to undertake this work,
and may the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you, now and always, Amen.