

### **A prayer of adoration**

Father God, full of wisdom and power,  
whose mighty arm stretches over all the earth:  
**we bow down in humble adoration.**

Holy Saviour, full of grace, lighting up our world:  
**we bow down in humble adoration.**

Spirit of the living God,  
full of the boundless riches available to us in Christ:  
**Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three in one:**  
**we bow down in humble adoration,**  
**open to your direction.**

**Amen**

### **A prayer of confession**

Lord, just as the wise men set out into new territory in search  
of you, help us to step out of life's narrow tramlines.  
Forgive us for seeking you out only in areas we know and in which we  
are comfortable.  
In their day, the wise men were outsiders, yet were guided by a star and  
spoken to in a dream; their steps directed for your purpose.  
Forgive us when we fail to see – or even dismiss – your leading from  
unexpected places and unlikely people.

Lord, forgive us.

Widen our vision and expand our minds  
to search and discern you in all places and people,  
that we may be drawn closer to you.

**Amen.**

**Read** Matthew Chapter 2 verses 1-12

## **Sermon by Rev Peter Lyth**

The feast of Epiphany takes place on 6<sup>th</sup> January, twelfth night which is the deadline for Christmas decorations to be taken down. The word Epiphany meaning some kind of revelatory moment, here we have the revelation of the infant Christ to a new group of people. The reading today is a familiar one with a story that only appears in Matthew's Gospel – the Magi led by a star to the infant Jesus. Legend (and nativity plays) have it that there were three Magi or wise men that made the visit to the baby Jesus. They are even given names: Melchior, Balthazar, and Caspar (or Jasper). Melchior was supposedly a king of Persia, Balthazar a king of Arabia and Caspar a king of India.

In the legend. Melchior was an old man with a white beard. He was the giver of the gold. The middle aged one was Melchior, the giver of the Frankincense and the youngest Caspar who gave Myrrh.

Of course, this is all legend. In the Bible, the magi are not named, indeed there is no confirmation that there are three of them. We don't actually know where they came from, although scholars have suggested that they came from Persia, given that we are told that they came from the east. We don't even know for sure that they were kings – there are references in the Old Testament such as in Isaiah chapter 60 that refer to kings bowing down to the Messiah and it is this that has led to the supposition that they were indeed royalty. Before this seems to become too much of an exercise in debunking, there are very good reasons why this is an important festival in the church year.

In actual fact, in Matthew's account, there are three main characters, of which the Magi form one. What is important their persistence in their search for the infant. They are obviously unaware of the political dynamics of the area as their initial stratagem is to go to the court of King Herod in order to enquire about the birth of a king who was likely to be a rival. Clearly this information troubles Herod as he enquires from the scribes and chief priests. Although their loyalty is mainly to Herod, they provide the information through the scriptures that are required to enable the Magi to continue their journey to Bethlehem. Throughout their journey, they are guided by God, firstly by the star, then by means of the prophesy of Micah. God's intervention continues as their dream prompts them to return by a different route. Clearly they form part of God's plan.

When they arrive, they are clearly prepared and know exactly what to do. They offer their gifts and they worship the new born king with joy. We don't know what their motivation was to make their journey and to offer the gifts, but Matthew tells us that the magi made the proper response to the new born King of Israel – worship and joy. This episode is the fulfilment of scriptures in the Old Testament that point to a time of restoration when, according to Isaiah, “all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD”. They mark the fact that these representatives of non-Jews have their place in worshipping the Christ. They set the scene that will mean that at the end of the Gospel, the disciples will be instructed to spread the good news and make disciples of all nations.

The second main character is Herod. He comes to the fore later in the chapter, but here it is clear that his scheming is no match for the Magi as they are guided by the hand of God. His master plan, to get the Magi to do his dirty-work by reporting back to him with the location of his rival is thwarted. Instead, they are warned in a dream and they return by a different route. His significance in the plot is that he represents the traditional, imperialist powers, full of threat. They seek to protect their power by all means, yet ultimately they will be frustrated by a different sort of power – the power of the Christ, King Jesus.

Finally, but by no means least, there is the character of Jesus himself. He, himself does and says nothing in this story. Yet the whole story revolves around him. The whole point of the story is that this child is the King of Israel. The prophesy that the chief priests and scribes in the court of Herod uncover describes him as, “a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel”. The Greek verb that is translated as “shepherd” describes what a shepherd does with his/her flock – tend, protect, guide and nurture. This kind of kingship is in stark contrast to the despotic rule of Herod, representing as he did, the imperial power of Rome. This kind of kingship would later be mocked and derided by those same authorities as Jesus went to the Cross, but yet would ultimately prevail.

So here we have a pivotal episode in the account of God's plan for the world. Jesus is to be a new kind of King, the fulfilment of prophesies and the bringer of salvation. Here is the revelation that this salvation for the world will come

through Jesus the Jew. It is the culmination of prophecies through the centuries and as the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth unfolds, there are many more than these strangers from the East that will be touched – a Centurion, a Samaritan woman at a well to name but two. Ultimately, it will be the disciples who spread the news still farther – to the ends of the earth.

### **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord, we thank you that you want to speak to us,  
and use so many ways to do so –  
some of which can be so completely unexpected  
that we don't look for them.  
Thank you for what we have explored and learned today.

We cannot expect the unexpected,  
but help us to be open to the possibility!  
Help us to look out for people and situations  
through which you speak to us.  
Help us to know what you are calling us  
to be and to do in your name.

And help us to act,  
to make our faith an everyday faith  
in which your will is done,  
and your kingdom comes among us.

**Amen.**

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