

Everyone is welcome to this At Home Service for 10 January 2021
Prepared by Rev Mary Petersen

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Today we celebrate Epiphany – the traditional time for reflecting on the wise men, their gifts and their dawning understanding of what Jesus meant for all.

May God bless, inspire and challenge you and give you peace.

We gather together as the people of God

Call to worship: based on Isaiah 60

Arise and shine like the sun: the glory of the Lord is shining on you.

Look around you and see what is happening:

the Lord will be your eternal light.

The Light of God shines among us. God is with us.

Open our eyes, Lord to your light .

Open our hearts, Lord to receive what you show us.

Open our minds, Lord to the mystery of you among us.

Open our lives, Lord to your healing love for us.

Light of the world, guide us into this new year.

Sing: Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.

Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God to endless years the same.

Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.

We listen to and engage with the Word of God

Congregational story time: *Camels and Symbolic Gifts*

- Have you ever had a ride on a camel? Did you feel comfortable? How would you feel if you had to ride a camel for days, weeks or months?
- What do you know about the gifts brought to Jesus by the wise ones? Yes, they were gold, frankincense and myrrh, and they were gifts suitable for a king, but what do you know about what those gifts symbolize?
- The wise ones came from far away – they were Gentiles not Jews. They help us to see that the love of God, and inspiration from God, are available to everyone.

Sing: In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north,
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

In him shall true hearts everywhere their high communion find,
His service is the golden cord close-binding all mankind.

In Christ now meet both east and west, in him meet south and north,
All Christ-like souls are one in him throughout the whole wide earth.

Reading: Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

Listening to God

How do we hear God? Is it just through the Bible or do you believe that God still speaks today in all kinds of ways?

I certainly believe that God continues to speak and has always spoken in many different ways to different people. The Bible is central to our faith but I think sometimes some people are in danger of worshipping the Bible rather than worshipping God. God is so much bigger, so much more wonderful, and cannot be contained in the pages of our Bible. Yes God speaks through the Bible but also in many other ways – in the past and now. God can speak to us through things that happen to us, through special places or events, through the words or actions of other people, through things we read and through what we sometimes call that voice of conscience, something that speaks to us from deep inside.

In the story of the magi, those wise ones who came a long way to visit Jesus and bring him gifts, they did not learn about Jesus from the Bible – they did not have the Bible as we know it. They were not Jewish so they did not even have the Jewish law, the Torah, which is the first five books of our Bible. How did they hear from God? - through their knowledge of the stars.

Does that make you feel uncomfortable? - to think that God called these people to go and find the Christ child, through their understanding of the stars? Today many Christians are very wary of anyone who claims to know something through the stars – but God called the first Gentiles to see Jesus through their study of the stars. I'll just leave you with that thought and we'll come back to it later. But right now, let's just listen to the story of the magi, the wise ones, being read from the gospel of Matthew. Listen carefully to what is told to us through this story and what is not there!

Reading: Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Sing: As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright:
So most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to thee.

Holy Jesus, every day, keep us in the narrow way;
And when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright need they no created light,
Thou its light, its joy, its crown, thou its sun which goes not down,
There for ever may we sing hallelujahs to our king.

**Reflection: GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH: GIFTS FOR JESUS,
THE LIGHT FOR ALL NATIONS**

Today is an opportunity for worship at the beginning of our New Year but we are also just past January 6th which is recognised as Epiphany. An Epiphany is a moment when it feels like light is being shone onto something we did not previously understand, a sudden realization, an aha moment, an intuitive new

understanding of something that might seem very ordinary on the surface but becomes extraordinary in a new realization. We might call it a dawning of new understanding. An epiphany is like the coming of a brilliant light with the power to transform - a gift from God. At Epiphany we think particularly about those wise men, led by the light of a star, who came to see Jesus and to worship God, and we rejoice that the light of God is revealed among us in unexpected places and in unexpected people.

Epiphany, on the 6th of January, was in fact celebrated by the early church long before Christmas Day became a Christian celebration. Christmas Day first appeared on the Christian calendar in 336. One version of the story says that Church leaders at the Council of Nicea, ten years earlier, had argued about which was more important: 25 December or 6 January – and they compromised with a decision to celebrate both and combine them by calling the gap between them the Twelve Days of Christmas.

Some early legends about the wise men say that they travelled for a year and twelve days and arrived on January 6th. Other legends and paintings identify three wise men by giving them names : Melchior in an early Christian story is the oldest, usually first, carrying the gift of gold. Balthasar is often shown in paintings as a middle-aged man with a dark beard, who gives frankincense and Caspar the youngest presents myrrh. Caspar is often painted as a handsome black youth. Some early paintings of the wise ones have as many as 12 travelling to find the Christ child. “Three” is only mentioned in connection with the gifts, not the people.

During the Middle Ages, people began to interpret the three, that had come to be part of tradition, as representing the three parts of the world that were then known : Europe, Asia and Africa – and eventually they came to represent all people. They later came to be thought of as kings mainly because they brought gifts that were associated with royalty – because the gifts were precious and valuable. They were tokens of wealth, as well as being a scent of grace and balm for pain.

If you listened carefully to the reading you will have realised that Matthew tells us very little about the wise men. Yet we know from history that wise men or magi were influential leaders in ancient Persia. They were members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia and Babylon who interpreted signs using astrology and astronomy and dreams, and they offered political and military advice to powerful kings. “Wise ones” is a more accurate synonym for magi – and they were certainly not Jewish, they were Gentiles. So Herod, king of the Jews, was nervous in their presence. Yet the fact that Matthew, the gospel that emphasises Jewish tradition, tells the story of these Gentiles being important early visitors to Jesus, is very significant.

These wise men had spent many years studying the stars – they were astronomers and astrologers and scholars – educated men revered for their learning and knowledge. When they discovered the meaning of the star they were watching – that a new king would be born in Judea, they set off to find him.

They had gifts of understanding and knowledge that enabled them to learn from what we now call astronomy but was usually called astrology in their times. They studied the stars and learned from them. The actual story in the Bible, in Matthew’s gospel, which is the only place this appears, does not tell us much more about them than that – they studied the stars, they came from the east following a star and they brought three gifts – that’s all – nothing about how many of them there were, about riding on camels and certainly not about being kings. Just that they studied the stars and they came from the east and they brought three gifts.

There is much we can guess from that information and much that can be identified or understood. For example, if they came from the east to Jerusalem, they would have to cross desert country – because that is what there is there, out to the east. And that is where the camels come in. In 2012 I had the privilege of travelling in the Arabian desert and I saw lots of camels. Camels were, and still are, the common mode of transport in the deserts – so were probably the transport the wise ones used to travel to Jerusalem - but the Bible does not say that.

Does that mean we should forget about the camels and the journey and all the other traditions that have grown up around these wise ones?

No – I don't believe so. God has given us intelligence and imagination and we are expected to use those precious gifts to help us understand what this story means for us today. **Because that is what really matters: what is God saying to you and to me today?**

If we realise that the wise ones probably rode on camels for many days, if not many months, we may have an inkling of how difficult that journey was, how uncomfortable it would have been – and yet they were determined to make the journey and find the Christ child. Maybe that says to us that we need to persevere even when the going is really tough – because God calls us on and what we discover along the journey is worth the effort.

It would have been a very long journey over difficult country. The wise ones were determined however to find and worship the child. They gradually understood more and more about their journey and its destination. The unfolding vision drove them on. They came with a sense of excitement, of wonder and of adoration. They came to meet a wonderful baby through whom the light of God was shining. And when they met him it was an epiphany for them – a moment of new transforming understanding.

The wise ones delivered their gifts to Jesus, with great joy; gifts that were so symbolic of the life he was to lead.

Gold we know is still very valuable. Gold was a gift suitable for a king. Yet in Bible times frankincense and myrrh were as rare and as valuable as gold. Frankincense and myrrh are both actually fragrant gum resins from under the bark of a tree. Those trees grow in only a few desert places but each tree produces about ten pounds of resin a year. Frankincense and myrrh are both like spices – and indeed are sold in spice markets around the world, particularly those close to those desert places.

Frankincense burned slowly giving off an exotic fragrance. Incense smoke was seen as the connection between the human and divine worlds. The Israelites used a special blend of incense as part of their worship. Only certain families were allowed to prepare the formula and only the priests could offer it in the temple.

Resin from frankincense and myrrh was also used in cosmetics and medicines. Frankincense was thought to have antiseptic properties. Myrrh was used particularly in perfumes. Myrrh was also a critical part of a recipe given to Moses by God for blending a holy oil: oil that was used to anoint priests and the altars and articles of worship in the temple. Many cultures, however, used myrrh on the bodies of the dead. The Jews used it in burials and when Jesus was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb, it was a mixture of spices that included myrrh that was brought to prepare his body.

But when the wise men came to see the baby Jesus they gave these precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. God can help us use our imagination to interpret what they mean to us right now. The story of the worship these wise ones offered to Jesus contributed to making believers of all nations. What does their story mean for us? Why is this story there? What does it mean to you?

In Ephesians chapter 3 we read that the Gentiles have a part with the Jews in God's blessings. That is us, you and me. We are all part of God's family. Maybe today there is a new understanding, a revelation for you that God's love is for all – we do not have to come from a particular group or background. God's love is for everyone.

Two weeks ago some of us thought about the story of Jesus being taken to the temple by his parents for the ceremony of purification and dedication. There he was met by Simeon and Anna who also made a journey in understanding and shared a transforming revelation. Simeon listened to that little voice inside him telling him to go to the temple and he did not hesitate to go. Anna was already there waiting. Some of us need prompting to be in the right place to receive a revelation, an epiphany, others are already there waiting.

I wonder what is the revelation, the epiphany, the new understanding for you today?

We can be transformed by the light of God - open to the joy of the world around us and responsive to awe and wonder. We need to be open to God in ways that do not limit what God might do in us.

In the letter to the Ephesians there are many words that illuminate, reveal, and open our understanding to the way that God works in us. It is all about grace. It is God's grace that is at work in us. Frankincense is a symbol of the scent of grace.

Jesus came into this world to bring light into darkness, to **be** light and to encourage his followers to be shining lights for others too. If we catch the vision of Jesus, we will see the world with new understanding – open to awe and wonder and willing to trust. We have a responsibility to care for each other and to serve others as Jesus did.

If we are wise, we will follow the light of God in our lives, like those wise men followed the star. Will you put God at the centre of your life for 2021?

May you be transformed by God's love so that you may share God's vision and bring light into the lives of those around you. May you follow the light of Jesus this year and use your gifts in the service of God and the community. God bless you. Amen.

We respond to God

Norman Brookes, a New Zealand Methodist minister has written some words that may give you some new insights into the meaning of those special gifts: *Gifts are a sign.*

Gifts are a sign - To tune: Epiphany Hymn Adapted from words by Norman Brookes

Wise were the ones who brought gifts to the Christ child, guided by star to this wonder they came;
Kneeling before him, they gave to the Christ child tokens of wealth, scent of grace, balm for pain.

Gold is a gift that can speak of abundance, the rich abundance of life that God gives.
Our gift is gold when it's rich with commitment, tested, refined, through the lives that we live.

Frankincense too is a gift that is worthy; it speaks of fragrance, of lives touched with grace.
Frankincense brings into all our relations gentleness, kindness and peace in our place.

Myrrh is a gift that's not welcomed or looked for; symbol of death, of love being embalmed.
Myrrh speaks of life in its sorrows and sadness, but for the living, its word is – be calmed!

These were the gifts that they brought to Christ's cradle. What are the gifts you are longing to bring?
Bring what you can, and give as you are able; give him your life, the best gift for our king.

Prayers of the people: Think about the gifts and skills you have to offer to God and to use to serve others. Think about those you know who have a special need of God today.

Loving God, we offer ourselves to serve you and pray for your blessing on all that is done in your name. May there be blessing for all who serve you and this community in mission and ministry. For the power of Christ's love in our lives, for the promise of a world renewed, we give our thanks and praise, most gracious God, to you. Amen.

We affirm our faith together:

We believe in one God who offers us the Light of Life and makes us one community in peace and love.

We go blessed by the Spirit of God

Sing: Words and music by Jim Strathee

I am the light of the world, you people come and follow me!

If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be.

**When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and the shepherds have found their way home,
the work of Christmas is begun: *I am the light***

**To find the lonely and the lost, to heal their broken souls with love,
to feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
to feel the earth below, the sky above; *I am the light***

**To free the prisoners from their chains, to make the powerful care,
to rebuild the nations with strength of goodwill,
to be at one with people everywhere; *I am the light***

**To bring hope to every task you do, to dance at a baby's new birth,
to make music in an old man's heart, and sing to the colours of the earth. *I am the light***

Blessing:

The light of God shines brightly: on, in and through us.

May the light of Christ guide all your steps, your thinking and your action.

The Spirit of God is with you always - in times of joy and times of challenge.

God loves you. God bless you. **Amen**