

A service for Epiphany 7th January, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 3

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 2001 by Revd. Tim Hughes, who, with his wife Rachel, are senior pastors at Gas Street Church in the centre of Birmingham and have founded Worship Central, a worship training and resources centre. Tim was born in High Wycombe, but moved to Harborne as a teenager when his father became vicar of St. John's church. We shall sing hymn number 175, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness'.

**1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore you,
Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:**

*So here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you're my God,
And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,
Altogether wonderful to me.*

**2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,
Glorious in heaven above.
Humbly you came to the earth you created,
All for love's sake became poor. Chorus:**

**3. And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:**

© Tim Hughes

Let us pray.

Lord of creation, you gave your beloved Son, Christ Jesus, to our world as a helpless baby, born to ordinary parents in a stable because there was no room for him in a house or inn. You did not send him as a prince in a palace with servants to care for him and soldiers to protect him; nor did he sleep on a downy mattress in silken sheets. Instead our Saviour slept on a bed of hay in a manger, for you intended Jesus to experience our lives, know our happiness and woes, our pleasures and pain, our trials and hardships. He came as Immanuel – God with us and among us. Heavenly Father, you gave him to the world even though you knew that he must suffer and die to save us from the powers of sin and death. Amazing God, we offer you our worship and adoration as we sing your glory, pray to you in faith and receive your holy word.

Although the pressures and pleasures of life threaten to crowd him out, help us make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, for without him we are indeed hopeless. We know that our lives are marred by our failure to love you and our neighbours wholeheartedly and confess that all too often we are faithless, self-centred and hard-hearted. Let the light of your love drive away our inner darkness, so we lead Christ-centred lives and as we repent, we ask you that we receive a fresh start with you,

our gracious, loving God. Merciful Lord, as we thank you for all you have done throughout our lives, may we spread the Good News of your Salvation in all that we do and say. Help us make time to serve you as you wish us to, so that, by loving our neighbours, we may bring you honour, praise and glory in the wonderful name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

We say the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples.....

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Many of their hymns are set to old Scots ballad tunes, but this is sung to “Scarlet Ribbons”. Number 222, ‘Who would think that what was needed’.

1. Who would think that what was needed

To transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army,
Proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
That a child might lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

2. Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,

Monarchs scorn and angels sing;
Such a place as none would reckon
Hosts a holy, helpless thing.
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers
Watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

3. Centuries of skill and science

Span the past from which we move,
Yet experience questions whether,
With such progress, we improve.
While the human lot we ponder,
Lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

© John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (1958 - 2019)

In our prayers of intercession, when I say ‘Your kingdom come’, please respond with, ‘Your will be done’.

Almighty God, Christ Jesus your Son came as Light for our broken and sin-darkened world, for which we pray now. Although we offer ourselves to play what part we can to help people who are in need, or distress, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, to whom nothing is impossible.

Help us to play our part, however large or small it may be, to build your kingdom through our discipleship. May we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches, or by supporting the work done by food banks, street pastors, the

Salvation Army, or any organization that serves the poor and vulnerable in our society, or by supporting Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations that address the grievous poverty in the Developing World.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

We pray for our church, the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide and enable us to serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted. Help us to find new ways, not only to preach good news but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. Help us to live in the light of your birth and fill us with your love for all.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of all, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost in Gaza, as a result of the heinous attack by Hamas in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting. Remember in your mercy people who have lost loved-ones, been injured and traumatised, for those taken as hostages and also ordinary civilians trapped in Gaza with nowhere to flee, who face constant danger and deprivation as the war rages on. May the Knesset show mercy to civilians in Gaza by allowing the provision of essential supplies and by tempering the fury of its actions. We pray for an end not only to this war and the one still being fought in Ukraine, but to all conflicts around the world. May lasting peace, based upon justice and mercy, be established world-wide, rather than remaining a forlorn hope and may the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and discrimination receive the practical and emotional support they need to rebuild their lives.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one, for this time of year adds to the pain they bear. We pray for people who are facing unemployment, addictions and loneliness at a time we usually associate with joyful celebration. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of everybody around us, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone know who needs your help at this time

Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so it may bring them healing, comfort, hope and peace. Enfold us all in your love and mercy, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, thereby setting us free to serve you for ever.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm, help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the fullness of your love with all-comers and fit us to boldly bring the light of your grace to this corner of your kingdom throughout the New Year, in Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Amen.

We shall continue with a hymn written by Rt. Revd. Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta between 1822 and his premature death in 1826. His See ranged from Sri Lanka to Australia and New Zealand, so it is understandable how he came to work himself to death. Nevertheless, he gave us a number of lovely hymns. We shall sing hymn number 227, 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,'

**1. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

**2. Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies his head, with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.**

**3. Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine?
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?**

**4. Vainly we offer each ample oblation;
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration;
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.**

**5. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

© Reginald Heber {1783 – 1826}

Sermon: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Matthew 2:2

Several years ago, I heard someone dismiss the Nativity stories of Matthew and Luke as 'adult fairy stories', but he had missed their point and importance. I don't think they were intended to be historical accounts, and certainly Mark has no Nativity, but they are 'teaching stories' in the rabbinical style. Just as the account of Job is not intended as a literal account, but a way of explaining the randomness of suffering, especially of the faithful, so the tales of the shepherds and the magi have important messages for Christians today, just as they did two thousand years ago.

The openings of Matthew and Luke are highly symbolic. Matthew's visitors were Gentile astrologers and would have been despised by ordinary Jews, not just because they were foreign, but because astrology was prohibited by the Torah. In the eyes of most Jews they were doubly damned – as far away from God's grace as anybody could be, not only as Gentiles, but as heinous law-breakers. Luke's shepherds were also

despised by respectable Jews, even though sheep were a vital part of the Judean economy and Jacob and King David himself had once been shepherds. Shepherds could observe neither food nor hygiene laws when they were with their sheep, so they were considered ceremonially unclean and needed to be cleansed by a priest before they could worship in synagogue or the temple. {They were also unable to give evidence independently in a court of law, for shepherds' honesty was brought into question as a result of the habit of claiming other shepherds' sheep as their own}. However, despite the low regard in which both the magi and shepherds were held by the Jews, God first revealed the infant Jesus to them, not to King Herod, nor High Priests like Annas. The Jewish hierarchy did not see the Messiah first, as they had expected. Instead, outsiders, the lowly, sinful and marginalized received that blessing, so God's kingdom stands traditional values on their heads and gives us all hope.

While John Henry Hopkins' carol, "We three kings of orient are" is responsible for many Christmas cards depicting three oriental gentlemen on camels as they plod their way towards Bethlehem, there is no evidence in the Bible that they were kings, nor that their names were Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar, nor, even that there were only three men. Indeed, I think it is unlikely that three Magi, an order of astrologers, would have travelled for up to two years in 'bandit country' – even on Roman roads – without an entourage or guard of some kind, in their quest for a 'new-born king'.

The magi, or wise men, were unfamiliar with the Jewish faith, yet when they reached Jerusalem, they found Herod and his advisers unaware of the birth of the Messiah. Their enquiry about 'one born king of the Jews' caused a real storm. Far from welcoming a child who scriptures said would grow to re-establish a close relationship between God and his people, Herod and his court saw the infant as a threat to his power. There is savage irony that the Jews in Jerusalem, who had been waiting for more than seven hundred years for the Messiah, were blinded by their prejudices against the infant Jesus, yet they considered themselves 'God's chosen people'. It is telling that no one, not even the high priests, asked to accompany the magi, so they could see and worship the baby, yet in Matthew's words, the wise men **'saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.'**

The gifts are significant, for gold showed he would be a king (though not in earthly terms). Frankincense indicated he would be holy, while myrrh foretold his death. It is also worth noting that the magi found Mary and Jesus living in a house, not the stable, so it is reasonable to suggest that Jesus may have been up to eighteen months old and the magi were rather late for the celebration! It is also clear that if the magi had understood the Jewish faith, they would not have asked Herod their question about the new king and the lives of baby boys might have been saved, always assuming that the Massacre of the Innocents was an historical event. It is remarkable that the birth of a baby in Bethlehem may have led Herod the Great to order all male infants of two or less to be slaughtered by his troops though, as Bethlehem was a small town, it is likely the victims of the massacre numbered between twenty and two dozen, not that it would have been any consolation to their bereaved parents. There is no historical document of such an event, but that is hardly surprising, for I imagine that the King would hardly want it publicised. However, such ruthlessness is plausible, as Herod was responsible for the murders of one of his wives and three sons, so the killing of a few peasant children would have meant nothing to him.

The nativity stories challenge us to be open to God's call, to make ourselves available to him, as did the wise men and shepherds, not to be blinded by our prejudices

and preconceptions about who or what the Messiah should be. Unlike the magi, we know about Jesus as King of kings, who became the one perfect sacrifice to defeat sin and death, freeing us to serve God because we love him and are loved by him – rather than having to try to win his favour.

Despite all the challenges that we may have to face this year, let us face 2024 with confidence and joy, for Jesus is with us every step of life's journey. He is Immanuel, God with us. Let us hear and answer God's call and, if the going is tough, or if we find ourselves feeling disheartened, may the Spirit grant us the persistence of the magi. We must not forget the love God has for all people, particularly the burdened, lowly and marginalised, for we neglect their well-being at our peril, especially in a time when so many of our neighbours fall into those categories. My friends we have seen a Light – the inextinguishable light of God's love in Jesus – so let us reflect it in words and deeds of love day by day, in order that we offer the treasures of our heart to the Saviour of the world. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by Revd. James Thomas East, who sacrificed the money he had saved to visit the Holy Land, in order to pay for a life-saving operation on one of his congregation in 1911, long before the Welfare State was created. Instead, he took a holiday on the East Coast, where he wrote this Epiphany hymn. Sadly, it is not included in "Singing the Faith", but was in "Hymns and Psalms". We shall sing hymn number 128, 'Wise men, seeking Jesus'.

**1. Wise men, seeking Jesus,
Travelled from afar,
Guided on their journey
By a beauteous star.**

**2. But if we desire him,
He is close at hand;
For our native country
Is our Holy Land.**

**3. Prayerful souls may find him
By our quiet lakes,
Meet him on our hillsides
When the morning breaks.**

**4. In our fertile cornfields
While the sheaves are bound,
In our busy markets,
Jesus may be found.**

**5. Fishermen talk with him
By the great North Sea,
As the first disciples
Did in Galilee.**

**6. Every town and village
In our land might be
Made by Jesus' presence
Like sweet Bethany.**

7. He is more than near us,

**If we love him well;
For he seeketh ever
In our hearts to dwell.**

© *James Thomas East {1860 – 1937}*

Benediction

May the joy of the angels, the wonder of the shepherds, trust of the Virgin Mary, the steadfastness of Joseph, the diligence of the Magi and the love of the Christ-child, keep and sustain us all now and forevermore and the blessing of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.