

The Epiphany - 5th January 2025

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12

A Sermon by Mark Willis, Lay Reader

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Although the Romans ruled the Holy Land during biblical times, Latin was not the universal language of that region. It was Greek, due to the earlier colonisation of the region by Alexander the Great. Greek was the most commonly used language of the day, spoken by many and particularly in the cities where communities mixed. Consequently, the gospels were written in Greek, to be accessible to as many peoples as possible.

The meaning of Greek words can vary slightly according to the context in which they are used. This is partly the reason for finding different translations of the Bible. The visitors that we celebrate in Epiphany are interpreted by some as kings, by some as astronomers, and by others as wise men. Some texts use the actual Greek word which is magi. I have to confess that as a Star Wars enthusiast I may mistakenly refer to Jedi, who of course come not from the East but from a galaxy far, far away.

Apart from telling us where the magi come from, the Bible gives no further detail about these visitors. We are not even told how many there are, although the number three is often inferred from the three gifts which are recorded. But having referred back to the original text I am open to the possibility that maybe a fourth was with them. I hope those of you familiar with the Star Wars stories appreciate the subtlety of that remark.

Last week Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple. Traditionally, God was understood to reside in the temple, accessible only to the high priest. But the coming of Jesus to earth and the gift of the Holy Spirit has changed all that. God is now accessible anywhere and will reveal himself to those who seek him. Take as an example our magi astronomers who were earnestly studying the heavens. A specialist interest, so how might you interrupt their passion and attract their attention? In this instance God put a new star in the heavens to guide them to himself. But if others are searching for God, where might they find him? Perhaps in the smiles of others, or in a reassuring hand on the shoulder in the workplace, the community or church, in messages on posters or passages in the Bible.

It may take a while to recognise his presence. Our magi looked in the wrong places at first – in Jerusalem rather than in Bethlehem, and more consequentially in Herod's palace rather than in an inn-keepers stable. But the good news is that

God is actively searching for us. He loves us, he wants to be with us and he calls us to be with him. We are told that the magi came from the East, which signifies that they were gentiles and not Jews. God is now accessible to every person, Jews and gentiles, just as was foretold in our first reading from Isaiah: 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn'.

The magi kings came into the very presence of Jesus. Can we also? In our second reading Paul says: 'In *Jesus* and through faith in *Jesus*, we may approach God with freedom and confidence'. So yes, just as the magi approached the infant Jesus, we too may take ourselves directly into the presence of God.

What should we do when we are there?

Consider again our magi kings. Kingship represents power, wealth, influence, and privilege. Yet here our earthly kings are bowing before an infant child, bowing before the true kingdom, power and glory in the universe. Bowing before our Lord. The magi bowed down and worshipped the infant Jesus. Later, that same Jesus would suffer the burden of our sin upon a cross so that our souls, cleansed of sin, may become children of God. I think we also may bow down and worship him.

What gifts should we offer?

Our magi wise men took presents which would have appeared strange to Mary and Joseph, a humble family. But with hindsight, their presents appear highly symbolic. Gold for kingship (the King of Kings), frankincense for godliness (it is used in worship), and myrrh for suffering and death. What gifts might Jesus possibly expect from us? Incredibly, he simply desires our faith in him, our love for him and for one another, and our worship.

What should we do after we have met him?

Our magi from the East went home, back to live in their own community, but they did not go by the same route. They went a different way. Should we walk a different path? Should our lives be changed by our meeting with God? Our lives will not of themselves be easier, but, freed from the bondage of sin, our lives have a new purpose. We are called to live in the light of Jesus Christ and to carry this light to others in an otherwise dark world.

The magi have discovered what the shepherds before them discovered – an open door into the very presence of God. What a way to start the new year and a new life.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.