

Dear friends,

Here we are in 2026! May I wish you all a Happy and Blessed New Year.

This week we look at the Epiphany when the three wise men visited the baby Jesus some two years after his birth. God's activity is centred not at the focus of human activity in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem – a place often easily overlooked. As we think about the choices which the wise men made when they came to worship Jesus, we can reflect on the choices which await us in the year ahead – some which we may need to make now and others which will crop up during the time ahead.

As always, I wish you every blessing – and look forward to our journeying together in the coming year.

Margaret.

Call to worship:

A new year has begun, and we come to worship in the faith that God will always be with us.

May we be re-awakened to the countless choices on our life's journey, opening ourselves to all that comes and being aware that everything provides the opportunity to learn the wisdom of respect, responsibility and right judgement and to learn more of the ways of God. Amen.

God calls us here to this place, in this moment.

He meets us wherever we are, in this moment.

Put down your burdens and wonder at the miracle of God with us.

Lay aside the heaviness of habit and wonder at the unexpectedness of God.

Wonder with the Magi at God's amazing presence.

Wonder at God who fills the ordinary with extraordinary life.

Together, let us worship God who calls us into love, peace and mystery. Amen.

The words to 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning' by Reginald Heber [1783-1826]

Singing the Faith 227

1 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning, dawn on our darkness, and lend us your aid; star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

2 Cold on his cradle the dew-drops are shining; low lies his heads 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 your aid; star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where the infant Redeemer is laid.

Prayer including the Lord's Prayer.

Almighty God, we praise you for what you are to us: our creator, sustainer and redeemer.

We praise you for the beautiful world entrusted to us – and for our creation in your image.

Inspire us to respect, understand and love one another, rejoicing in all our differences of background, education, faith and culture.

We praise you for the human brain through which you give us freedom to choose ways that are either wise or foolish – and we thank you that we can be partners with you throughout our lives.

We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Faithful God, you have made us in your likeness. We confess that we often try to make you in our likeness, and do not follow the example of Jesus Christ, whose life shows us the difference.

Help us to understand our own errors and foolishness as we seek your wisdom and so move forward on our life's journey, for your sake. Amen.

May the God of light and healing lift up our eyes and help us see where we can share our gifts – lift up our hearts and help us to feel the pain of others – lift up our lives and help us to give help where there is need – so that now, with sins forgiven and confidence restored, we may serve you and those around us, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and 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.

Matthew 2: 1-12 [taken from The New Testament [a New Translation] by William Barclay.

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When Jesus had been born in Bethlehem in Judea, in the time of King Herod, there came to Jerusalem from the East scholars who were students of the stars. 'Where,' they asked, 'is the newly born King of the Jews? We are looking for him, because we have seen his start rise, and we have come to do homage to him.' When King Herod heard about this he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem shared his alarm. So he called a meeting of the chief priests and the experts in the Law and tried to find out from them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they told him, 'For scripture through the prophet says:

"And you Bethlehem, in land of Judah, are by no means least of the leaders of Judah, for from you shall emerge the leader who will be shepherd of my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly sent for the scholars from the East and carefully questioned them about the date when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem. 'Go,' he said, 'and make every effort to trace the child. And when you have found him send word to me, for I too wish to go and do homage to him.' When they heard what the king had to say, they set out, and the star, which they had seen when it first rose, led them on, until it came and stopped where the child was. And very great was their rejoicing when they saw the star. They went into the house, and they saw the little child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and did him homage. They unpacked their treasures, and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Because a message from God came to them in a dream, warning them not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by a different route.

Comment:

This passage traces the journey of men from the east coming to visit Jesus. By identifying Herod, Matthew dates the birth of Jesus in a wider time context and provides a geographical location. In later

verses 16-18] Herod's duplicity is introduced and fits what we know of Herod as a historical person. The astrology of the time associated each person with a star and thus it is not worthwhile to seek astronomical explanations for this star. Within the story it operates as a supernatural sign. The prophecies quoted by Matthew are a blend of Micah 5: 1-2 and 2 Samuel 5:2.

This nativity story is different from that told by Luke. Here, the visitors enter a 'house'. Their gifts are extravagant – gifts which would later be linked with different aspects of Christ's life and ministry, but this is not explored here. The coming of Gentiles to worship in Jerusalem is an ancient part of Jewish tradition and serves Matthew's emphasis in showing how Jesus fulfils and develops the teaching of the prophets.

The story invites the consideration of various themes: God reaches out to draw people to Jesus – the best of human intelligence acknowledges Jesus – and the created world honours his birth. It is also marked by inclusiveness, since the characters at the centre of the story are from outside of the people of God. It contrasts political and historical kingship [duplicitous and oppressive] with the Kingdom of God [vulnerable and welcoming to all] and continues the emphasis on the Davidic theme introduced in the genealogy and traced throughout this Gospel.

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The gap between the nativity and Epiphany features a space between event and response. Many Gospel stories are characterised by an immediate response but in this story, weight is given to the searching, the misunderstandings and wrong turns. Here, even the wise get lost, make bad judgements and mistake the nature of the one they were seeking. Does that mirror our faith experiences?

Is there a gap between Jesus entering our lives and our response? Gaps can be very fertile if we allow them to be. When we're looking for something which we've lost or trying to remember something which eludes us, it is when we stop searching that we find it or remember it. Perhaps we are rather nervous about gaps and rush to fill the space – indeed, we sometimes don't let one thing finish before we dash on to the next.

There are gaps between expectation and reality: the wise men see neither the falseness of Herod nor the reality of Christ.

In the meeting of the wise men with the infant Christ, we encounter mystery – a baby who is a king but not the anticipated kind of king. How are they supposed to work out what this means? The wise men meet mystery in Christ. This is a different sort of gap – something beyond understanding. How do we respond to mystery? Religious icons invite us to step beyond the surface and find our place in the picture. Mystery engages us and draws us in. I wonder how this affects our sense of ourselves and our response to others.

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We traditionally commemorate three magi, perhaps because of the three gifts they present to Jesus. In fact, Matthew gives neither their number nor their commonly attributed names [Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar]. The names arise from later traditions – and eastern churches actually commemorate twelve magi.

When the magi find the infant Jesus, they kneel and pay him homage. These actions are indicative of great respect and were typically used in the ancient world when venerating a king. Matthew includes the prophet Isaiah's promised gifts of gold and frankincense [Isaiah 60:6] but adds myrrh as a gift of immense value and symbolic significance. The gifts often have specific symbolic meanings attached to them – gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity, myrrh for suffering. But it has also been suggested

that in these gifts God provided the resources needed by Mary and Joseph for the flight into Egypt, and to sustain the family while they lived there.

Prayer: The wise men made a long and difficult journey to find their king. We pray for those facing difficult times in their life journeys today that you will give them assurance that your love surrounds them, and the strength to persevere.

We pray for all who make difficult journeys not sure there will be a welcome when they arrive. We pray for all who seek work and see only bleak times ahead.

We pray for those who are ill – especially those nearing the end of their earthly journey. Give peace to them and their families – and to those who care for them.

We pray for all who are back home after the festivities and find themselves alone, and perhaps lonely. We pray that they will remember that they are loved by others and by you – and help us to remember them in the busyness of our lives. Give all these people hope, Lord.

Be with us all on our journey, Lord, bless us as we grow daily closer to you. Give us hope, Lord. Amen.

Creator God, over millions of years and through billions of selections your earth has evolved on a truly amazing journey. Our own personal development is also amazing to us.

Help us to understand the choices that others have made for us – and help us to make our own decisions with insight and compassion, especially when they affect others.

May your eternal wisdom guide us as we seek constructive ways to develop your kingdom for all creation. Amen.

The words to 'Birth brings a promise' written by Marjorie Dobson [b. 1940] Singing the Faith 226

1 Birth brings a promise of new life awaking, dawning of hope through a child's open eyes.

Uncharted future is there for the making, challenge and change in a baby's first cries.

2 Every new life changes those who are round it, making demands of commitment and care, calling for love to enfold and surround it, reshaping patterns by claiming a share.

3 Jesus the newborn crossed time's moving stages changing their course by the act of his birth, translating God from the mystery of ages, rooting our faith by his presence on earth.

4 Wonder and worship were waiting to greet him, love and devotion were his to command, life was transformed for the ones sent to meet him, touching their God in a child's outstretched hand.

Close:

God of all time, we pray for your encouragement. May we encourage those who doubt their own value in the world. Give us the wisdom to use our time well, so that in the coming week and year our eyes will be open to the mystery of all you have given us, especially through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, the wise men had a star to follow. I don't always find it easy to follow you – teach me to see the signs you have especially for me in your Word – in your world – in your wonders – in your work. Amen.

