

PRAYERS AND REFLECTION FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS
OBSERVING *EPIPHANY*
3RD JANUARY 2021

Introduction and Explanations

Dear friend,

I wish you a very happy and safe new year. Perhaps more than any new year, we are glad to leave the old behind, and look with eager anticipation to the new. How we want 2021 to be a better year than 2020! We are searching for answers, searching for hope – and if not for a star, perhaps for a vaccine.

Today we observe Epiphany (in advance of 6th January for the liturgical purists!). We journey with the Magi. What were they looking for? Who were they looking for? What did they find?

May God bless us on our journey of faith-discovery.

David

Revd David Hinchliffe,
Chair of the South East District of the Methodist Church.

Preparing to Worship

*You may like to be still, light a candle as we continue to celebrate Jesus, the Light of the World;
and listen to a calming piece of music as we gather in worship*



“Epiphany” by Albert Herbert
(1925-2008)

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Preparing to Worshipⁱ

**GREAT AND WONDERFUL GOD, WE SEEK YOU.
WE LOOK FOR YOU. WE LONG FOR YOU.
WE COME AND OFFER OUR LIVES, OUR LOVE, OUR HOPES TO YOU.**

O Holy Father, who gave guidance to the wise men
until they bowed in worship before you before our Saviour,
lead us to an awareness of your presence
and to bow in adoration before Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. AMEN.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” (Isaiah 60.1)

BLESSED BE GOD FOR EVER AND EVER!

Hymn (Singing the Faith) 190 – Angels from the realms of gloryⁱⁱ

Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth ;
You who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth :

*Come and worship,
Christ the new-born King,
Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the new-born King.*

Shepherds in the field abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light :

Come and worship,

Sages, leave your contemplations ;
Brighter visions beam afar ;
Seek the great Desire of nations ;
You have seen his natal star :

Come and worship,

Saints before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In his temple shall appear :

Come and worship,

Though an infant now we view him,
He shall fill his Father's throne,
Gather all the nations to him ;
Every knee shall then bow down :

Come and worship,

A Prayer of Adorationⁱⁱⁱ

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.

A Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness^{iv}

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.

Silence for reflection

Father God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ
to be born in a lowly manger;
a heavenly king worshipped by earthly kings,
yet destined to walk to the cross.

Through his blood shed on the cross:

we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 60. 1--6

Hymn (Singing the Faith) 227 – Brightest and best of the sons of the morning^v

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.

Cold on his cradle the dew-drops 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.

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?

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.

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.

BIBLE READING: Matthew 2. 1-12

Meditation and Prayer: "Gold for a King"^{vi}

Gold for a king, for the King of the Jews,
And King of all the earth, for he made it:
Stoop under the low lintel of humility,
To fall before him throned in a cradle.

Incense for a priest, for the High Priest of the Covenant,
Rising over the sacrifices that unite divine and human:
Through rough walls contain the Holy of Holies,
Where all may enter into a greater Covenant.

Myrrh for the dead, for those whose life returns to the Giver,
Yielding the breath that was granted for a span of years:
Learn from this Child that the cradle leads to the tomb,
But the anointed body is not the end of the story.

Mary and Joseph wonder at the strange visitors
Who are brought to their knees before their loved fragility;
Not yet knowing of the royal title
To be nailed over the priestly sacrifice, silent in death.

* * * * *

Star of Bethlehem:

Guide me onward
To the banquet of the King
To the pardoning by the Priest
To life beyond death.

being born. And echoing our Old Testament Reading (Isaiah 60. 1-6), they set out on an epic journey towards the Christ-child, to bring him precious, costly and symbolic gifts; but more than that, to bring him their worship. And yet for all their faith was strong, their route-map was partial. They knew their goal: to worship the Christ-child, but they weren't totally sure how exactly to get there. So what to do? In an age without the Sat-Nav, they asked for help. And not unreasonably (if unfortunately as it turned out), they travelled to the royal city of Jerusalem to consult the King – Herod. This is not unreasonable if you are looking for the one to be born King of the Jews!

Where do you turn when you have a decision to make?

When my predecessor decided that the time was right for him to move on from his role as Chair of the South East District, a colleague came up and asked me if I was going to apply. I was honoured to be asked, but the timing was wrong. I wasn't due to leave my appointment in the Channel Islands, and for us as a family, my son had still to complete his A-levels. So I wrote it off as an impractical idea. Then I arrived at the Methodist Conference, and a minister who I knew passably came up and asked me the same question. I was astonished. Why had he asked me that question? We weren't close friends. That night I barely slept, wrestling with whether this was God's prompting – or was this all about my vanity. I started to ask trusted colleagues. Their answers were varied: "no" – let your son finish school; to 'yes.' And, to the most practical: "you will only know if it is God's will if you apply. If it's not right, you won't be appointed." In the end it came down to trust: did I trust God enough for me to take the risk in faith? Thankfully I didn't turn to King Herod – who most definitely didn't have the Magi's best interests at heart, but only his own selfish interests. In the end, I had to take a leap of faith, and see where God lead. And in the end, it was indeed to the South East District! And in spite of the last year being very different from what we expected, I still feel this was (and is) God's calling!

Listening for the call of God is not always easy. Sometimes it is so obvious we can't ignore it. The Magi couldn't ignore the star. Sometimes it is a call to faith, an invitation to put the call to the test. The Magi didn't have all the answers. They still had to ask, to require faith to fulfil their journey. And sometimes we take a wrong turn. Turning to Herod was understandable – but a mistake. And yet even through the wrong turn the religious advisors sent them to Bethlehem. They made it!

Perhaps my favourite phrase in Matthew's gospel is this: "they were overwhelmed with joy."^{viii} The Magi were overwhelmed with joy when the star stopped. It was the end of the journey. But more than that (I suspect) they were overwhelmed with joy when they found the object of their faithful quest: Jesus! Overwhelmed by joy they knelt before Jesus. They worshipped him. They saw in Jesus what no-one else had seen: A King; a Priest; and ultimately, a martyr. Their wonderful gifts

reflect this complicated vision: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And then they returned home – warned in a dream not to return to Herod – by a different route. Travelling again!

What a journey. In this most Jewish of gospels, Gentiles are the first to recognise who Jesus is, and what God will call him to be and to do. Gentiles are the first to worship Jesus- even as an infant. And these wise men are the ones who will risk everything as they set out on this most challenging of journeys rooted in faith: faith that God has given them a sign, faith that God has called them, and faith that God will bring to completion that which he has set before them.

So what of us? We are beginning a journey into 2021. Many of us are hugely relieved that 2020 is over. It has been a ghastly year. We are thankful that by the amazing God-given ingenuity of scientists, vaccines have been developed to counter the coronavirus. And yet we know that at the moment the Health Service is unbelievably stretched, its wonderful staff worn out, and the number of people contracting the virus is frighteningly high – and rising. What we can't do is travel – except day by day. Yet the Magi remind us that the light shines in the darkness. The Light calls us to follow, and to be obedient. And ultimately, that call is to worship our Lord Jesus Christ.

Right now we too are to keep watch, to keep the faith, and to offer our worship as we travel into this New Year. As King George VI reminded the nation and Empire in his 1939 war-time address, quoting from the poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, “Gate of the Year”:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied:

“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.”^{ix}

With that faith to guide us, we can proclaim with confidence and joy the words of Isaiah: “Arise, shine: for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”^x Even when the world feels very dark, and our own ability to travel is limited. The light of Jesus shines. Alleluia!

“A Winter Benediction” by Malcolm Guite^{xi}

When winter comes and winds are cold and keen,
When nights are darkest, though the stars shine bright,
When life shrinks to its roots, or sleeps unseen,
Then may he bless and bring you to his light.

For he has come at last, and can be seen,
God's love made vulnerable, tightly curled:
The Winter Child, the Saviour of the World.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, we thank you that you have come into the world, and that your light continues to shine in the darkness: Alleluia!

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, we pray for your family, the Church – throughout the world. For Christians who are near and dear to us, and whom we know by name; and for those we do not know, yet belong to each other in you. Be with those, who like the innocents, face persecution for your name. Strengthen their faith, and by their example strengthen ours, that the light might shine.

Lord Jesus, Light of the world, we pray for our world, our nation, and our own community as we face the deep darkness of the covid-19 virus. We pray for our health service, for its extraordinary workers; for community essential workers who are helping our community to survive; for those in or community who are frightened, who grieve, who are alone, and don't know where to turn. Give wisdom to our Government and all who hold authority in their leading and decision making. May your Light shine in us, giving us strength and hope for the living of these days.

Lord Jesus, Light of the world, help us. Help us in our own journey of faith, that we might be faithful to your call, and respond to where you lead. Give us courage when we take wrong turns to try again. Raise up for us wise people who can journey with us along the way. And in our hearts, overwhelm us with joy as we worship the Christ-child, Prophet, Priest, King, servant and Saviour.

Lord Jesus, though we walk in these dark days, may the words of Isaiah continue to challenge, inspire and light up the way: "Arise, shine: for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

In the name of Jesus we pray: AMEN.

The Lord's Prayer

HYMN (Singing the Faith) 228 – Hail to the Lord's Anointed^{xii}

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
Great David's greater Son !
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun !
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity.

He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong ;
To help the poor and needy,
And bid the weak be strong ;
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Are precious in his sight.

He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth ;
Love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
Spring in his path to birth ;
Before him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go ;
And righteousness, in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

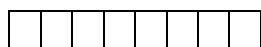
Kings shall fall down before him,
And gold and incense bring ;
All nations shall adore him,
His praise all people sing ;
To him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.

O'er every foe victorious,
He on his throne shall rest ;
From age to age more glorious,
All-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove ;
His name shall stand for ever,
His changeless name of Love.

The Blessing^{xiii}

A new year has begun.
Let us leave behind all that is past,
and walk together into the future.
Let us trust in the God of new beginnings,
and worship the God of fresh hopes.

And so may the blessing of God: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us, and all whom we love this day, this New Year and for ever more. Amen.



Acknowledgments:

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- ⁱ David Adam, *Radiance of His Glory*, (London: SPCK, 2009), Book II, 23.
- ⁱⁱ Vv. 1-James Montgomery (1771–1854). V. 5, unascribed text in *The Christmas Box*, 1825. Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 190.
- ⁱⁱⁱ © ROOTS for Churches Ltd (www.rootsontheweb.com) 2002-2020. Reproduced with permission.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Reginald Heber (1783–1826). Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 227.
- ^{vi} Raymond Chapman, *Stations of the Nativity* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 1999), 57-58.
- ^{vii} Michael Perry (1942–1996). Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number **216**. Words: © Mrs B. Perry / Jubilate Hymns, Administered by The Jubilate Group, Thorne Park Road, Torquay TQ2 6RX. <copyrightmanager@jubilate.co.uk> Used by permission.
- ^{viii} Matthew 2.10 (NRSVA)
- ^{ix} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gate_of_the_Year Accessed on 30th December 2020.
- ^x Isaiah 60.1 (NRSVA)
- ^{xi} Malcolm Guite, *After Prayer: New Sonnets and Other Poems* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), 110.
- ^{xii} James Montgomery (1771–1854). *From Psalm 72*. Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 228.
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