

Theme: A new understanding

Call to Worship

Matthew 2:1-12 Visit of the Magi

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ ““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 shepherd my people Israel.””

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

HYMN StF 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 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 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 your aid ;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Reginald Heber (1783-1826)

Prayer of Approach

Lord, these are the days when holiday time comes to an end, and ordinary life confronts us again. We pick up the burdens we laid down, and continue the journey.

God of life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and wear us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage.

Lord, let us not forget the splendour and the wonder of Christmas in darker days. Let us remember how you came amongst us, and from the humblest of beginnings, lit up the world. Let us remember how the shepherds saw the skies alive with the glory of God. Look now on the paths we follow in our daily lives, which we see as dark and rough and littered with obstacles. Flood the path with light, we pray you; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise.

And, turning back to Christmas, we give thanks for that time of comfort, of families together and of cheer. We give thanks for the beauty of the winter season, for the fields white with frost and the blackness of the skeleton trees at dusk. For the silver mist which creeps and slides on the ground, into hollows, and down slopes, and its brilliance in the sun. For the red of dogwood, and the straw-colour and burnt orange of the grass and bracken which sticks through the snow; for the jewel-drops of water that hang from the eaves when the thaw comes; for the tracks of unseen animals that have come and gone in the night; for the urgent moves of small birds as they search the frozen land for an elusive feed. For all things, their gear and tackle and trim, we bless you O Lord.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever.
Amen.**

The Covenant

Gracious God, on this day, I and many others seek to renew our covenant with You. Your love is strong and faithful. You never stop loving us. But our love for You is weak and fickle and we often fall short of what we have committed ourselves to be and do. Forgive us for our reluctance to follow Christ, our half-hearted worship, our failures in caring, service and witness, and our unwillingness to challenge injustice.

Have mercy on us, O God, and renew in us both the desire and the ability to be people of love.

Thank you for your gracious words:

'Your sins are forgiven'. *Amen.*

RESPONSES:

As far as we are able, with God's help:

Worship

We will **pray** daily.

We will **worship** with others regularly.

We will **look and listen for God** in Scripture, and the world.

Learning and Caring

We will **care for ourselves** and **those around us**.

We will **learn more** about our faith.

We will **practise** hospitality and generosity.

Service

We will help people **in our communities and beyond**.

We will care for creation **and all God's gifts**.

We will challenge **injustice**.

Evangelism

We will **speak** of the **love of God**.

We will **live** in a way that **draws others to Jesus**.

We will **share** our **faith** with others.

A time of prayer

**All: I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will, not mine, be done in all things,
wherever you may place me,
in all that I do and in all that I may endure;
when there is work for me and when there is none;
when I am troubled and when I am at peace.
Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;
when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking;
when I have all things, and when I have nothing
I willingly offer all I have and am
to serve you, as and where you choose.
Glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
May it be so for ever.
Let this covenant now made on earth
be fulfilled in heaven. Amen**

Junior Church Video: Taking the hump <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxlt9DdxcFs>

Introduction/Prayer

HYMN 'We are the parts of the body'

Junior Blessing

Reading Jeremiah 31:33-34

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Reading John 15:1-9

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

HYMN StF 706 Longing for Light <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrpJw9yX6y0>

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| <p>1 Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.
<i>Christ, be our light !
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light !
Shine in your Church gathered today.</i></p> | <p>3 Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.</p> |
| <p>2 Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.</p> | <p>4 Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.</p> |
| | <p>5 Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.</p> |

Bernadette Farrell (b.1957)

Sermon

Today, as at the beginning of January every year, we re-affirm our covenant with God. So far as I know this annual re-affirmation is a Methodist thing, and I think it is a very healthy thing for a church to do. It's good to remind ourselves of the covenant that binds us to God, and it is good also to remind ourselves that if we breach that covenant, we must make atonement in order to repair it. That means that we can make amends, and this is often understood as reparation – as somehow subtracting something from ourselves or undergoing a penalty or suffering in order to make things right. Over the years, the Church has gone in for this in a big way: "Say 50 Hail Marys", or absent yourself from communion for a period; things like that.

But let us not lose sight of the redemption of our sins which Jesus promises, which is part of his new Covenant:

Matthew 'My blood of the Covenant, poured out for many for the remission of sins'

Mark 'My blood of the new Covenant'

So, Jesus is saying, the response to our sins is God's forgiveness, if, and only if, we resolve to try and do better in the future. That is our promise on this Sunday, and every time we pray together. We pray to keep to the Covenant *depending on God's grace*, because we are weak and fallible. We cannot be trusted or even trust ourselves always to do what is right. But we can follow Jeremiah's vision, which we heard in our reading this morning, and ask God to write the covenant on our heart, so that we may know God, and he may know and inspire us. That does not mean immediately make us perfectly good; that is not possible for humans. We

cannot make our good intentions stick completely, but we can become sincere in our good intentions. This is what God asks of us. As we draw closer to him, our intentions will become more reliable, but depending on our sincerity, our sins will be redeemed. This is what Jesus promised, and that redemption is offered to the whole world.

That point neatly encapsulates the importance of the three wise men, whose visit to Jesus's humble cradle is our focus today. The visit has certain telling characteristics.

The first is that these three were important thinkers – but their importance did not give them first place amongst the visitors. That favoured position went to the shepherds and who knows what other humble people who popped in to have a look, not to mention the farm animals that just happened to be there or come with their minders. So, we might conclude from this that God is not deferring to status, or to intellectual excellence. It is not just a developed curiosity, but an affair of the heart that brings people to Jesus's presence.

The second point is that these three sages from the east are not Jewish. This signals right at the beginning of Jesus's life that his importance is not just to Israel but to the whole world. His message is not confined to those who already worship Israel's God, but is available to all who may come to see the light.

The clue is in the name 'epiphany', which means 'revelation', and marks the point of change from ignorance to insight. We call this 'the Epiphany', but in fact there are a number of epiphanies in the Old Testament, and the New, in which there is a sudden moment of understanding. Take the sacrifice of Isaac, for instance. Abraham, knife uplifted to sacrifice his beloved son, saw with blinding sight that God did not want human sacrifice¹. There were epiphanies too at Bethel, when Jacob awoke from his dream and found himself at the gate of Heaven²; in Psalm 139 we have the understanding that there are no limits to God's presence. In the New Testament we have plenty of epiphanies, too; the centurion at the crucifixion, who exclaims, "Truly this was the Son of God!"³; Saul on the road to Damascus⁴, and the thief crucified with Jesus who requested salvation⁵, and many more.

So, why do we dignify the visit of the wise men with the title of 'the Epiphany', as though there were no other moment of revelation? I think it deserves the name, because it stands for that point in time, and in our journey of faith, when we suddenly realise that the pegs on which we have hung our understanding of life's meaning have given way. Think of Paul on the Damascus road as an example of this. Think also of what makes Christian communities distinctive in a materialist world: it is the rejection of material standards as the main foundation of meaning in our lives. It is also a new understanding of our own condition, of how despite the sinfulness of our nature, we can be redeemed from condemnation simply by turning ourselves to God and accepting his grace.

If you remember our carol service just before Christmas, we heard T S Eliot's wonderful poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. This spoke of a hard and bitter journey. It was not just the rigours of travelling a long way in winter that is meant here. It was also a journey from an old understanding of the world to the new one which was about to supersede it. It was about the 'hard and bitter death' of their old expectations and their position in the world. It was about the need to take a message home to their distant lands, saying that theirs was no longer the wisdom to follow; a new regime applied which did not have their philosophical and astrological expertise at its centre.

¹ Genesis 22:8

² Genesis 28:16-17

³ Matthew 27:54

⁴ Acts 8-9

⁵ Matthew 26:74-75

The Church tends to celebrate Epiphany as a demonstration of the sheer seniority of the Christ-child. His three visitors brought splendour, grace and favour. Their presents demonstrate splendour but also remark on his holiness and foreshadow his suffering: Myrrh for embalming, frankincense for holiness and righteousness, gold for wealth and power.

We should go further, and see both the revolution involved in Christmas, and the harrowing nature of the demands involved in it. These are linked by a covenant, to follow the message of God as revealed to us. Only grace will help us through.

HYMN StF 204 In the bleak midwinter <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd38OWOXk40>

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| <p>1 In the bleak midwinter
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone ;
snow had fallen, snow on snow,
snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter,
long ago.</p> | <p>3 Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim
throngèd the air —
but his mother only,
in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the Belovèd
with a kiss.</p> |
| <p>2 Heaven cannot hold him,
nor the earth sustain ;
heav'n and earth shall flee away
when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter
a stable-place sufficed
God, the Lord Almighty,
Jesus Christ.</p> | <p>4 What can I give him,
poor as I am ?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb ;
if I were a wise man
I would do my part ;
yet what I can I give him —
give my heart.</p> |

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

Communion

Introduction

We come as we are, because Jesus told us only to have a loving heart, and we remember his invitation and his promise:

“Come”, he said, “all ye who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you peace. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest”

“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger; and he that believes in me shall never thirst. I will not cast out the one that comes to me. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; they shall be satisfied.”

We come today in that peace, to inherit that rest.

Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you
And also with you

Lift up your hearts
We lift them to the Lord

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God
It is right to give thanks and praise

It is indeed right, it is our duty and our pleasure to give thanks to God for his grace; for his bountiful creation, for the love which has fathered us forth, for his great gift to the world, our Lord Jesus; for his guiding ministry, for his death on the Cross, and for his presence ever with us, alive in the world, we give our heartfelt thanks and praise. *Amen*

Breaking

In doing this, we follow Jesus's example and command.

On the night when he was arrested, Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks to God, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me. Likewise, after supper, he took the cup, and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me."

Sharing *Please take bread and wine/juice as you are able*

Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And also with you

Peace

On the evening of the first Easter Day, when the disciples were together behind locked doors for fear, Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you!" he said; then he showed them his hands and his side. On seeing the Lord, the disciples were overjoyed. Jesus said again, "Peace be with you".

Joyful in the presence of our risen Lord, let us share, as we are able, signs of peace.

Prayers for Others

O lord, let us pause with you and look at your world. We pray for the bereaved, for all who have lost their loved ones, their home, their livelihood, in the last year. We pray for those who have lost confidence, love, hope that things can be better, the belief that life is blessed, the belief that bad times will come good, and that your hand will guide them through. Put out your hand, O God, touch them and stop them in their slide. Lift them up, and let them see your love, the love that you have for the least of us. For in your safe keeping shall no-one be lost, come suffering as it must, and death. We rely on you and we remain sure of your helping hand, and of your love, which has fathered us forth and keeps us now. O may all feel that supporting and guiding hand, to help them home when all hope seems to have given out.

And now, we pray for those who particularly stand in need of God's help today.

"Watch, O Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or weep, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.

Tend your sick ones, O Lord Christ.

Rest your weary ones.

Bless your dying ones.

Soothe your suffering ones.

Pity your afflicted ones.

Shield your joyous ones.

And for all your love's sake.

Amen."

HYMN StF181 Of the Father's Love Begotten

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9JUt_G_Js0

- 1 Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.
- 2 By his word was all created ;
he commanded, it was done ;
earth and sky and boundless ocean,
universe of three in one ;
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,
all that breathes beneath the sun,
evermore and evermore.
- 3 This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word ;
now he shines, the long-expected ;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore.
- 4 O you heights of heaven, adore him ;
angel hosts, his praises sing ;
all dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King ;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert sing,
evermore and evermore !

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-c.413)
translated by John Mason Neale (1811-1866)
and Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877)

Blessing

May the God of heaven and earth bless us and keep us; may his face shine upon us that we might know God's peace and live in ways that reflect his love, now and always. *Amen*

Credits

Methodist original material for the Covenant Service by Roger L Walton
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