

Matthew 2:1-12 with Isaiah 60:1-6 Epiphany 5th January 2025

Lord fill us with your Holy Spirit as we look at your word this morning. May we be enlightened and moved to worship you afresh. Amen.

Well Happy New Year! And happy Epiphany – If that is such a term!? I don't imagine there will be many in the secular world celebrating Epiphany or even know there is such a day!

Many may have made new year's resolutions though, did any of you make promises to yourself or others? As we think about Epiphany and this New Year, maybe our new year's resolution could be to see and worship Jesus afresh every day in the coming year. My bible app has been encouraging me to sign up to read the bible in one year. I did that last year, so I will probably do something different this year. But I encourage you to consider reading the bible in one year if you haven't. There are a number of plans you can use.

Some of you might be wondering what is Epiphany? In the Church it is a festival or holy day that celebrates the revelation of the baby Jesus to the world – in commemoration of the coming of the Magi to see Jesus – it was the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Its actual date in the Church calendar is the 6th of January but it is customary to celebrate it on the closest Sunday. Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost were the great holy days for the early Church. In some countries, gifts are given on this day, as it was the day the Magi gave their gifts to Jesus. Christmas came along later...

In today's reading from Matthew, we see Jesus being revealed to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were there right at the beginning of Jesus life, as it was part of God's plan to bring all peoples to himself. At the end of Matthew Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples of *all nations*.

Who are these Magi? We often call them Kings and think that there were three of them, but the gospels do not call them Kings and we only came up with the number three because they brought three gifts! We have sung "We three Kings of Orient are" this morning – a good hymn but perhaps not so biblically correct! We only find this story in the gospel of Matthew who calls them Magi – or wise men and says they came from the east.

Many speculate that they came from Persia and in the seventh century they were even given names – Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar!

What we do know is that these men studied the stars. As Christians we are advised to keep away from reading the stars – rather we are to put our trust in God, so don't go looking at your horoscope to find meaning! But as we know God uses all sorts of people and means to bring about his purposes.

What about the star they were following – was it a supernatural phenomenon, a regular star, a comet, or a conjunction or grouping of planets? The fact is God who is the creator

of the moon and the stars and put them in their places to be ‘signs for the seasons’ could easily and purposefully have arranged those stars in such a way that ‘when the time had fully come’ there would be a particularly bright light in the sky to catch the attention of certain oriental star gazers who would be so moved to pack up and head out on a holy pilgrimage.

This star does not behave as stars normally do but stops over the place where Jesus was. This is a supernatural rather than a natural occurrence – a sign from God, who has power even to stop stars in their tracks.

Before Jesus was born God used a census decreed by Emperor Augustus to ensure that Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, so the prophecy from Micah might be fulfilled that the Saviour would be born in the City of David. It was that prophesy that the scribes reported to Herod when the Magi arrived at the palace seeking a King.

“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.”^[1]

And these wise men coming to worship Jesus from the East fulfil the reading from Isaiah 60 we heard today.

‘Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah; and all from Sheba shall come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.’ (v 6.)

God put all things in to place so that these men from the east could come and welcome and worship Jesus.

Aside from Epiphany being a word to describe the festival of the Magi visiting Jesus...what does the word *epiphany* mean? – it is an illuminating discovery, or a moment of great revelation or realization of something important, or a powerful religious experience. It seems these Magi had an *epiphany* when they saw Jesus – they recognized that this little baby was no ordinary baby – they knew in their heart of hearts that he was the King of Kings. They were overjoyed, they bowed down and worshipped him and gave him precious gifts.

This story of the magi reminds us that God does not do things in the normal way... In Luke we read that it was the shepherds who were first invited to come and see Jesus – they were the lowliest of the low. And the Magi coming from the east – were Gentiles from afar. Jesus was not just the King of the Jews – he came for all people; every race and language and colour, every age and gender and background, every social standing and I.Q. level. He came for the whole world.

God sent an angel to the shepherds, and he placed a special star in the sky for the Magi, going to great lengths to reach out to those who lived far away to bring them to himself.

As he invited the Shepherds and the wise men, he invites us to come and worship Jesus. The magi brought him gifts – Gold fit for a King – Frankincense, used by Priests in the temple, (Jesus being the ultimate Priest who reconciled us to God) – and Myrrh – used to embalm the dead. These gifts showed that the child born to be King was the same man born to die for us. The Priest who would bring us back to God himself, through his death and resurrection.

At Christmas we remember that Jesus is God's gift for us – giving us hope, love, joy, peace, salvation, and eternal life. What gifts do we give to Jesus? It is easy to get caught up on gift giving to each other...but the idea of gift giving at Christmas comes from the gifts the Magi gave to Jesus.

At our 5pm Christmas eve family service I asked the young ones what they thought would be the best gift to give Jesus. A young boy of about 6 who was sitting next to me, called Teddy, had the best answer, he simply said 'love'.

This Christmas, like the Magi, did we give Jesus a gift? Did we worship the King of Kings? Did we kneel before him in awe and wonder? Did we give him our love?

I think sometimes we worship the traditions of what we do at Christmas, or maybe we have the knowledge of Christ, but we haven't really met him.

Did you wonder why the Chief Priests and teachers of the law who could tell the Magi where to find Jesus, didn't rush off to worship him also? Herod, we know was jealous and paranoid of anyone who might threaten his power, but what about these supposedly wise Jewish religious leaders? They had the knowledge; they had the history, but they failed to see and worship the Messiah that God had sent. Later, these religious leaders also sought to put Jesus to death. We can have knowledge and tradition...but if that is all we have then we are missing out.

So, what gift *can* we bring to one so great you may ask?

Teddy's answer of love is perfect, as are these words from the carol *In the bleak midwinter?*

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 Him my heart.*

Jesus deserves our praise and adoration, our hearts...

As we give ourselves to him, he fills us with *his* very self that we may show his light in the world. Let's hear again from Isaiah 60...

'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light, and Kings to the brightness of your dawn...'

Jesus is the light, and we are to shine his light so that others will see him.

There is much darkness in our nation and in the world. There have been re-caps of the year 2024 on the TV and written about in the papers. The horrors of war in many places including the terrible state of conflict in the middle east where Jesus was born, the ongoing war in Ukraine. So many innocent civilians' suffering, so many killed. And we continue to see suffering through climate disasters.

There is darkness as we look at the state of leadership in many countries. Closer to home we've seen increase in young crime and such hatred in protests gone wrong. Many are feeling the impact of high inflation and cost of living. And there is always the darkness of illness, increased mental health, domestic violence. I did not see many good news stories being shared from 2024. Many walk in the darkness of despair, a life without hope.

But as Christians we rejoice in the good news of Jesus Christ. In faith we have hope. The light *has* come, it is here amidst the darkness, and we are to shine that light. Even in suffering we can still rejoice in the gift of Jesus Christ. We need to look on him. Isaiah says to *'lift up your eyes and look'*.

It was so wonderful to hear last Sunday, how Josh and Ely with MAF shine light in the darkness in Arnhem land and it was so great to have the Theos team shining the light of Jesus in Cowes this last week...showing love, sharing the gospel, having conversations of faith. I don't know how many new testaments they handed out! We need to pray that many will read them and have an epiphany as God's word speaks to them.

How will you shine the light of Christ? We need to love others as Jesus loves us. We need to share the hope we have in Jesus with our friends, family, neighbours. When people speak of fear and anxiety, we can offer to pray for them, tell them of God's peace and spread God's joy.

As we head into 2025 uncertain what the year will bring for ourselves and for our world, I pray we will remember the hope to which we are called. If you haven't had one, then I pray you have an *epiphany* regarding Jesus, or maybe you need a renewed vision. Look on Jesus afresh, and be amazed, bowing down before him in awe and wonder, recognizing that he is the hope for us and the whole world.

The God who created all things, who sent Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, who sent Angels to witness to the Shepherds and created a special star to guide the wise men from afar...is in control of the world. He will return to set it right one day and, in the meantime, he invites us to worship him, giving our lives to him and to build his Kingdom on earth- right here in Bass and Philip Island. Let's be praying for the nation-wide Anglican project of Hope25, sharing the hope we have in Jesus in our communities... let's pray that there will be revival across the land.

May we...*Arise and shine for the Glory of the Lord has risen upon (us).*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the light of the world. We pray that many will be drawn to your light, that many will have an epiphany and come to worship you. I pray that this coming year we will give you our hearts and worship you, shining your light in the world. In your precious name we pray. Amen.