

# Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

Epiphany 2025

*Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12*

The season of Epiphany reminds us that the coming of Jesus was the coming of the saviour of the *whole* world: the whole of humanity across the whole of its history and until time comes to an end. It's suggested by the inclusion of the wise men in the Christmas story, and confirmed by Simeon in his song when Jesus is presented in the Temple, which we will celebrate at the end of this season on February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The events we recall in Epiphany, as the word itself tells us, *reveal* quite how astonishing and miraculous and, yes, fully divine is the Christ-child. Astonishing and miraculous *because* he is fully divine, this tiny human child. There are no adjectives to qualify or hedge the humanity he loved and loves. In another moment of Epiphany, of revelation, when Jesus has come to Jerusalem for that last week, the one we call Holy Week, the voice of God is heard again. Then Jesus says something which we are constantly tempted to qualify or hedge: *And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.*

This great feast of Epiphany begins with the revelation of the Incarnation, of God made flesh, to the three magi, the three wise men from the East, which we mark today. In the Eastern Orthodox Church their liturgies for today's feast put it like this:

*The magi... worshipped him in adoration!  
For in the infant lying in a cave  
they had seen the God  
who is beyond all time!*

And worship they did. The word Matthew uses means 'prostrated themselves'. They got flat to the floor in all their finery, in that crowded, grubby cave.

Who were these magi, these pilgrims from far away, who saw a new light in the sky and made their way to the light of the world? A 'magus' (of which the plural is magi, of course) could be anything from a deeply serious man of learning, looking to the stars in order to find truth and wisdom, through to the kind of tricky charlatan we hear about in the book of Acts, who so enrages Peter with his attempt to buy spiritual power.

The magi who came to Bethlehem would most probably have been very serious figures, from a society where religious observance and philosophical enquiry were a rich and varied and vital part of life. They would have come from the lands to the east of Israel – Mesopotamia and Persia. They were, most likely, Zoroastrians: leading figures in one of the most ancient religions in the world, a religion which flourished there and beyond for many centuries. And the Jewish religion was well-known there too. The Babylonian exile

was one of the most traumatic things to happen to the Jewish people, but after the return to Jerusalem many stayed; and these communities lived on, eventually joined by Christian communities as the Church spread and grew.

And so these wise men, these philosophers, these connoisseurs of enquiry would have known about Jewish thinking – including their hopes for a Messiah. Their voracious appetite for truth, which would have made them interested in Jewish beliefs, gave them the courage and imagination to head west when that star appeared. It must have been a star which commanded attention: bright, alluring, inviting. And *miraculous*. As it happens, there was probably a dazzling conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn at the time, astronomers tell us. But in due course this was a star which appeared to move, which led the magi eventually to the manger itself. The magi were given a miracle, not a piece of magic as their name might seem to suggest. Miracle: when God intervenes in the natural order of things and changes the course of history. Miracle is real; magic is illusory.

The story of the magi comes to us from Matthew. In John's gospel we learn a lot more about the universal reach of God's mission in Christ. So for example we hear John the Baptist's recognition of Jesus' all-embracing mission – 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' Not the sin of the Jews, but of the whole of humanity. And at the end of the season we have Candlemas, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Luke it is this time, who tells us how ancient Simeon recognises the 'light to lighten the Gentiles'.

As Jesus, unrecognised in his resurrection body, told his friends on the road to Emmaus, all this was foreshadowed in the scriptures, if you only looked carefully enough. We see it in Isaiah, of course, which is why we have so many readings from that book that make our hearts burn within us.

And way back in Israel's history it can be found too. In King Solomon's Prayer of Dedication for the new Temple, there is this tantalising pre-echo of the three magi -

*..when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land... when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the people of the earth may know you and fear you*  
1 Kings 8.41-3

Jesus, defenceless baby in a crib, is also the new Temple, the dwelling-place of God on earth, born to save the whole earth. Who knows what prayers the three foreign visitors found themselves praying as they lay their meaning-laden gifts before that baby, and lay themselves on the ground?

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Two millennia on, then, when we're so challenged by the values of greed and individualism and worldly cynicism, and so dismayed by the vicious prosecution of war

and terror across the world, what gifts can we offer? Remember some other words of Isaiah:

*I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

How do we carry on this work of giving light? We know what it's about: it's about joy, and about the never-ending love and mercy and glory of God. This is the good news, the gospel.

And this has real content, and cost. If we are to continue the work of Christ, we are (to go back to Isaiah yet again) to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to those in captivity, comfort all who mourn. That's in our own, day-to-day living.

And when it comes to the horrors of war, not least those we see in the Holy Land, we have to remind ourselves and even dare to say it out loud, that Jesus spoke simply and uncompromisingly: love everyone, not just your friends; turn the other cheek; do not demand an eye for an eye. The way of Christ is not to hit back when hit.

This is all so hard, because we're faulty, fragile human beings. But in the light of Christ we must try, with that light shining out from deep within us – however flickering: light in our eyes, light in our words and deeds, to illuminate the darkest of dark places for those caught there, light in our hearts to make them warm.

That is doing the gospel, living the good news of Jesus Christ. Let us pray for the light of his love, that love for all of us, for all people, for all time, let us pray for that light, planted in us at our baptism, to be flamed up into an irresistible beacon of hope and faith and love. Amen.