

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Second Sunday after Christmas

The Feast of Epiphany

Sunday January 5 2025



St Peter's Notting Hill

Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN

Matthew 2: 1-12

If you have already gone back to work,
you may be surprised to be reminded that Christmas is still with us.

You may even be more surprised to know that
Today is actually Christmas Day for millions of Orthodox Christians
That's because today is the Feast of the Epiphany.

The medieval church calendar of the Orthodox Church says that the Epiphany
on the weekend of January 5 and 6 is a far more reliable date for the birth of
the Saviour of the World than the Western Church's choice of the 24 and 25 of
December for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Well, who knows which calendar is right?

Some believers from both traditions manage to have it both ways.

One of them is my daughter Victoria.

She was here at St Peter's last Sunday and also on Christmas Day.

But sometimes says she is an Orthodox through her mother's family.

So today, instead of being here my daughter is on a special train along with
hundreds of:

- Greek Orthodox
- Russian Orthodox
- Serbian Orthodox
- And other Orthodox Church members

Their destination is Margate.

Where under the supervision of some bearded Patriarch

Some of them will plunge into the icy waters of the English Channel
to wash away their sins.

I think we got a better and certainly warmer deal here at St Peter's with our:

- carols,
- and mulled wine!

Nevertheless, whether you are a Western or an Eastern Orthodox Christian the
glorious feast of Epiphany deserves to be taken seriously.

So let's now look carefully at our reading (the Classic Epiphany Reading) from
which I want to highlight five strange and powerful themes.

- Revelation
- Mystery
- Perseverance
- Worship
- And Adoration

Let's start with Revelation because the Greek word Epiphany literally translates
as 'Revelation'.

God reveals himself to us in many ways:

- Through the bread and wine which we will share together in a few
moments at our Communion
- Through his word in Scripture
- And through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In whatever form it comes, do not underestimate the power of Mystery in a
journey of Faith.

"Behold! I tell you a mystery" says Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58.

William Cowper's most famous poem, later a hymn, opens with the great line:

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."

And there are few more baffling yet enduring mysteries in the Gospel accounts in the birth of Jesus Christ than the arrival in Jerusalem of the Magi as recorded in our reading.

Who were these mysterious Magi?

In all the other parts of the Nativity narrative of the Gospel we can more or less relate to the main characters and the main scenes.

- The Shepherds
- Mary and Joseph
- The Baby lying in a manger
- The Oxen standing by
- Even the angels are within the horizons of our imagination.

But the Magi – who the heck were they?

They are enigmatic figures of mystery.

They have inspired artists but baffled realists.

I am sorry to have to give you the disappointing news that they were nothing like the fairytale actors who dress up in crowns and robes to appear in school nativity plays.

There are many legends about the Three Wise Men or even more improbably, the Three Kings.

According to tradition, but not mentioned in the Bible, they even have names:

- Caspar
- Melchior
- Balthazar.

They sound like the sort of names you might hear at a posh private nursery school in Notting Hill where Tom, Dick and Harry seem to have dropped out and may well have been replaced by

Hello Caspar Melchior and Balthazar!

But if we put aside colourful legends, we do know quite a bit about the Magi, particularly from the first century Greek historian, Herodotus.

Herodotus says that the Magi were a Priestly caste of the Persian Empire.

They were renowned for their learning and erudition.

Like the Levites of Israel, they were men of holiness and wisdom.

Their search for religious truth took them into the realms of astronomy and the interpretation of dreams.

So the first characteristic of the mysterious Magi was that they were Seekers.

All of us should be Seekers. All of us should emulate the Magi.

Who started their epic journey in hope that they could seek and find the truth about God.

And what a journey it must have been.

From Persia to Jerusalem required travelling well over 800 miles on the ship of the desert,

the camel whose uncomfortable humps made them light years removed from the modern comforts of a modern-day cruise ship.

T.S Eliot in his famous poem about the Magi

"A cold coming we had of it"

imaginatively portrays the miserable conditions of their long winter journey.

In order to complete it, the Magi must have needed enormous perseverance and determination to overcome the inevitable disappointments and delays of their seeking.

Perseverance, although mentioned often in Scripture, is a much-underestimated ingredient of a real Christian faith.

Persevering through life's

- trials,
- doubts,
- failures,
- and reverses.

Often requires

- commitment
- courage
- and endurance.

In the 1960s, they used to be a popular TV commercial with a jingle tune

“There’s no-one with endurance like the man who sells insurance”.

The endurance of the Magi was far deeper and more testing.

We can learn much in our own lives from their example.

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When they eventually arrived in Jerusalem the Magi asked the question recorded in verse 2 of our reading:

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him.”

Those of you here last Sunday may recall we tried to unpack why Herod flew into such a panic as a result of this question

– a panic that ended in the horrific slaughtering of all the baby boys in Bethlehem who were under two years old, in his failed attempt to murder the “King of the Jews”.

Why did he do it?

In a word, the answer lies in Herod’s insecurity,

coupled with psychopathic brutality on which he had considerable form.

But the behaviour of Herod, for which he was notorious, less surprising than the indifference of the Jerusalem elite – the Chief Priests and teachers of the law.

Despite their knowledge of Isaiah's prophecies, they could not be bothered to make the six mile journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find out more.

Still, to this day, indifference to Christ's Kingdom is an enormous roadblock to the spiritual joy which was felt by the Magi.

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Some people might wonder if those Magi were surprised when they were led to a stable.

Surely, they must have been expecting to be guided by the star to a Palace.

But being true men of God, they would have known that God is found in unlikely places.

Sometimes in the lowliest and humblest of places and hearts.

Far from being disappointed, our Reading tells us that the Magi were "overjoyed".

They knew that there is no greater joy in life than to discover Christ.

So what did the Magi do in their joy?

Verse 11 tells us: "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him".

Worship is vitally important to anyone's spiritual journey.

We are good at worship here at St Peter's thanks to the enormous talent and dedication of Joe Baxter and our worship team.

There are many forms of worship:

- Musical worship
- Silent worship
- Prayer worship
- The worship of bowing down and surrendering to God which is what the Magi did.

Perhaps a better collective word for all these forms of worship would be *adoration*.

Those of you have done the Alpha Course may recall that in the talk on prayer you are advised to use a centuries old Mnemonic known as the ACTS formula:

- Adoration
- Confession
- Thanksgiving
- Supplication

It is interesting that adoration comes first.

And the adoration of the Magi was of profound spiritual importance because it was so revealing.

I said some moments ago that the first and most important theme of this reading was Revelation.

So what did the Magi reveal in their Adoration?

Their first gift, before they presented the gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh was that they gave themselves

when they bowed down and worshipped him.

That is the gift God longs to receive from all of us.

- Our Commitment
- The Surrender of our wills to His will
- Obedience
- The gift of Self.

The Magi showed us the way.

As for the three famous gifts, no-one has ever explained them better than the 4th-Century sage, Prudentius, whose poem became a famous hymn. He wrote:

**Sacred gifts of mystic meaning:
Incense doth their God disclose,
Gold the King of kings proclaimeth,
Myrrh His sepulchre foreshows.**

Wise old Prudentius was to fourth-century hymn writing what Luke Littler is to 21st-century dart playing.

For Prudentius hit three stunning triples in these memorable lines about sacred gifts of mystic meaning.

Incense, still used to this day in many churches, was the symbol of Divinity.

Gold was the symbol of Kingship,

although it was a different form of Kingship.

As Jesus himself said to Pontius Pilate

"My Kingdom is not of this world."

A Kingdom, not of power, but of love and compassion.

And finally, Myrrh.

To this day, the ointment of embalming and of burial.

Myrrh symbolises the death, entombment and resurrection of Jesus.

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In a few moments, we will come up to the altar of this Church

and we will obey the command Jesus gave to His disciples at the Last Supper
the night before He died,

when He broke the bread and gave it to them saying:

"Take, eat, this is my body, given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me."

No command in the history of the world has been so faithfully, so lovingly, and
so frequently obeyed.

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"Do this in remembrance of me."

And let us today, on this Feast of the Epiphany, also remember the Magi

who, in their own mysterious way, also obeyed the call of Jesus.

Amen