

Lord God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, may we accept the gift of life your Son Jesus offers. Amen,

- Today is the last day of Christmas. Take your cards, trees and glittering lights down by this evening and pack them away carefully in a box, with a sigh of relief, for next December. The crib stays in church for the season of Epiphany until Candlemas which we celebrate on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, the bridge between Easter and Christmas.
- People like Christmas. It is still the one season they flock into church – we had nearly 3 000 in the fortnight leading to Christmas Day. Many come because it is traditional, not because it is truth. Magical is one of the most common adjectives used to describe a good Christmas experience, in church or anywhere else.
  - They miss the explosive phrases, the shit in the stable, and think only of the joy of a newborn child, as long as ‘no crying he makes’!
- Our job, hard though it is amidst the mince pies, the glitter ball and the tinsel, is to help them see more deeply than that and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make some connections with their own lives!
  - And just occasionally, with the occasional individual, we succeed.
- Today’s story, the twelfth day of Christmas is no exception. The common story is of three gorgeously dressed exotic kings travelling on camels arrive at the stable, give some strange Christmas presents and depart. A sort of bizarre interlude that affirms us in our desire to give and receive gifts at Christmas.
  - But have you noticed the explosive elements in this story? Here are just a few of them!
- First, of course, they were probably not kings. They were called Magi in the bible, which we translate as wise men. But do you know the only other occurrence of the word in the bible? It’s in Acts, chapter 13, verse 6 and describes a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. Here Magus is translated as magician, and it has definitely sinister and dark overtones.
  - So it may be more accurate to think of the kings as magicians, pursuing a religion that is certainly not Jewish, and maybe not even good.
    - There is a view which thinks that their gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh were tools of their trade, things they used for their magical dark arts, rather than brought as meaningful presents for a Jewish King, however we choose to interpret them.
  - Which makes sense when you read what Matthew has written. They appear in Jerusalem and presumably hover around the important and religious places, the priests at the temple, Herod’s palace and so on. Imagine what you would think if religious weirdos wearing strange robes, carrying odd implements and smelling of josticks – I don’t mean me you understand! Imagine people like this were waiting for you at the back of church.
- Not surprisingly Matthew tells us, ‘*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him*’. It would have been very unsettling.
- So the magicians head off for Bethlehem, having heard Herod’s even darker request, ‘*when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage*.’
  - When they find Jesus and his parents they give their gifts. Could this mean that their encounter with the new born Son of God so moved them that they renounced their dark arts and gave them to the King because they were beginning a new way of life?
- I find that quite attractive. Jesus calls all races and people, he crosses boundaries, speaking words of love to the poor and unloved and words of challenge to the rich and remote. And these rich remote men responded.
  - And God spoke to them in a dream that Herod was up to no good so, ‘*they left for their own country by another road*.’ The only road to life is through Jesus Christ! That’s quite explosive!
- Second, of course, we have the more traditional interpretations of the gifts. Frankincense, used to offer worship to the divine is presented to the urchin baby in the manger.
  - As clear a symbol as we can get that Jesus is not just another baby. Or rather he is not only just another baby but also the living Son of God incarnate in human flesh.

- And that surely is explosive. If it's true it means nothing less than God is turning the established values of the world on their head by valuing the weak and the powerless at the expense of the rich, the powerful or the strong. There is nothing strong about the manger scene apart from the presence of God in the midst of poverty.
  - And what does that say to the world about our own priorities which are so often to do with our own comfort rather than someone else's need.
- Third, there's myrrh. Used to anoint the dead. What a gift for a baby!
  - The meaning is startlingly clear. But you don't like to think about the cross at Christmas!
    - Jesus was born to bring freedom, forgiveness and new life to all who want it. He did by sacrificing his own life to the cruel and sinful demands of human beings. By sharing a shameful death with criminals and vulnerable victims he identified with the most needy and the worst offenders and showed that God's love overcomes all that divides, even sin and death.
      - The empty tomb, the living Christ, is living proof.
- And if you want any more proof that Matthew is deliberately using this story to highlight this fact, look at the words the Magi use when they get to Jerusalem, before frightening everyone by their presence. They say, *'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'* They call Jesus *'king of the Jews'*. The gift of gold is brought to the fore. Gold for a king.
- Do you know the next people in St Matthew's Gospel to call Jesus *'king of the Jews'*? It is the soldiers mocking Jesus just before he was crucified in chapter 27. They then put a sign over his head saying, *'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'* And the centurion rams home the point further by reminding us of frankincense when he says, rather more sincerely, *'Truly this man was God's Son.'*
  - Gold, frankincense and myrrh making their prophetic presence felt rather palindromically at the other end of Matthew's Gospel in chapter 27, the second to last chapter rather than the second.
  - The centurion, a servant of the old king, Caesar is discovering a new king, a new way of life. I wonder if he took it further or whether he just shrugged his shoulders and went home cynical and depressed about the effect of the might of Rome?
  - Because talk of kings is dangerous. At Jesus' birth, Herod was jealous and frightened. He could not, would not brook any challenging and so when the wise men did not return he started a mission of extreme cruelty massacring all the infants under two in the vicinity of Bethlehem. That's about as dark as you can get!
- I think virtually every element of this story is explosive, both then and now.
- But we are Easter people, living in the light and meaning of the cross and resurrection.
  - I find it hard to imagine what it must feel like not to have the hope and acceptance of Jesus Christ that comes from the cross and resurrection when you are celebrating Christmas. The emptiness of a materialistic festival without embracing the meaning about the unfairness of life and how God is doing something about it. A new king! A new way of life. A new hope!
- Our job is to focus on the light of the cross and the empty tomb and the extraordinary truth of God made man.
  - Crossing boundaries as Jesus did to talk to wise men and vulnerable innocents, to magicians and cynical world weary 'realists', to Kings and politicians and the disenfranchised homeless, offering a new hope, offering acceptance, enabling forgiveness, of selves and others, and challenging the comfortable to re-evaluate their aims. That's pretty explosive as well as you will know if you have ever tried it!
- For as we speak of Jesus, we can say with the prophet Isaiah, *'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.'*
- How do we do this? Well, that's another sermon, but perhaps the mix of old and young, of committed Christians and the newly interested in this morning's worship is one example.
  - I hope you will join us for brunch after the service and share a little bit of what Jesus has done for you in your life, and see what the response is! Amen!

- Perhaps one challenge this Epiphany is to aim for one encounter each week when we are conscious trying to live this aim, to cross a boundary and speak words of truth or hope or love or acceptance or forgiveness to someone else, preaching Christ to the world as this morning's gospel seems to urge us to do. Amen!