

The Lord be with you:

and also with you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

as we gather we must recall the promises and warnings given to us in the Scriptures.

Let us therefore examine ourselves and repent of our sins.

Father God, we confess that we often take the gifts of your creation for granted, and use them chiefly to further our own interests:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Saviour Christ, we confess that we often give in to the selfish desires of our hearts, and the uncaring ways of the world.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, we confess that we often close our minds to your influence, and fail to bear good fruits in our lives.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Absolution May God our Father forgive us our sins,
and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. **Amen.**

Isaiah 60:1-6 [The Ingathering of the Dispersed]

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.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 2:1-12 [The Visit of the Wise Men]

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany – the [feast day](#) that celebrates the revealing of [God the Son](#) as a [human being](#) in [Jesus Christ](#). At Christmas, we heard the story of the revealing of Jesus as a baby to the Jewish people of Bethlehem; to Simeon at the gate of the Jerusalem Temple when he was brought to be circumcised. Revelation to the chosen people of God.

But today opens up a much larger picture – Jesus is revealed as the Son of God to the rest of the known world – to the Gentiles – to the non-Jews. To us.

How? Because of other-worldly signs, noticed far away by astrologers who watched the sky and the stars. And these Wise Men from the East – so-called pagans from today’s Iraq and Iran – were sufficiently startled by the appearance of this star to trek right across the Iraqi river basins, through the Arabian desert and Syria, to Palestine, and to the little town of Bethlehem.

We’re told that they were guided by a star. What an amazing story for us to take in! You can imagine how much more amazing it must have been to the people who heard it at that time in the towns of Syria where Matthew preached his gospel, whether they were Jews or Gentiles. This was something big; something very big indeed! Our Lectionary ties into Matthew’s account directly with a prophecy of Isaiah about six centuries before Jesus’ birth, written after the Israelites had returned from Exile in Babylon. We’re told that camels would come from diverse places – Midian, Ephah and Sheba – all places in Northern Arabia and Iran - and that they would bring gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

The passage from Matthew about the visit of the Magi is the culmination of a whole tableau of events around the birth of this baby. Luke has a different memory of the night of Jesus’ birth, which we heard at Christmas: that famous vignette of the shepherds going to Bethlehem to share the incredible, awesome vision that they’d experienced – a glimpse of the glory of God and of his heaven.

And we’d almost miss the last sentence – “and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” He was named from heaven. Luke was determined to convince his readers of the divinity of Jesus. Glory absolutely suffuses Luke’s stories of the birth of Jesus.

But why are these great stories not in ALL the Gospels? Why does the visitation of the Magi appear only in Matthew, and not in Mark, Luke or John? Why is the Christmas story of angels appearing; of the heavenly host breaking through to our world and singing GLORY to poor rough shepherds recounted only in Luke’s Gospel? We have all been seduced into a homogenised picture of the birth of Christ Jesus. Oh, we can blame the Christmas card manufacturers who blend pictures of shepherds, cribs and stables with ones of Three Wise Men on camels, and a dash of Santa Claus and holly to add spice to the twaddle they peddle!

But we forget sometimes where these fabulous images of the birth of Christ come from, and the different sources in the different gospels.

You know that we try to read through one of the gospels each year, from Advent to Advent. This year it’s the turn of St. Mark’s Gospel. But ... but why is today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew? Well, it’s very simple - Mark doesn’t say a word about the baby Jesus. Nothing about shepherds, heavenly angels, cribs and mangers. Not so much as a mention of Wise Men. Nothing. Mark’s Gospel starts with Jesus as a thirty-year-old. No birth narrative at all! To be fair to Mark, all he wanted to do was to explain to his audience that Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jews. In comparison, Matthew does the whole nine yards of the Christmas story. He did all of this to convince his Jewish Christian audience that indeed the baby was the long-awaited Messiah.

John's Gospel is my personal favourite, though. It doesn't do the whole story, either. Jesus arrives in chapter one, fully-grown, to be baptised by John the Baptist, just like in Mark. But look at the gorgeous richness of the text in the middle! It positively oozes with the fabulous details of the story of Jesus's sojourn on earth; of his brilliant preaching. And John convinces us especially of Jesus' absolute godliness – he is divine. It is such a rich gospel that it's best read in small mouthfuls.

So we come to Luke. The old reliable. That suave evangelist, whose focus is to make the whole story of Jesus totally believable and normalised. His audience was the educated Roman and Jewish Christians throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke didn't attempt to write his version of the story of Jesus from scratch; he didn't think it was important to mention astrologers from East of the Roman Empire – no Magi, as we have seen.

I want to encourage you to see that all four gospels are different; that each one has elements of the incredible story of Jesus Christ. Because it is, in our rational world, quite incredible that God sent his Son to dwell on earth; that he sacrificed himself on the cross. That he offers us eternal life. No one gospel gives us all of that; each one colours in a part of the story; each shines a light into aspects which we would otherwise miss. Each twinkles with the richness of a jewel. Each reflects the light with a different sheen. The nuances, the different emphases, are what come out as we hear each gospel read continuously throughout the year.

Savour Mark this year, as we enjoyed exploring Matthew last year. Luke comes round again in 2022, and John pops out with his own rich insights, especially during Holy Week. I hope the same passion that afflicts me envelops you about these precious gospels. Happy New Year!

Amen

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the Epiphany

O God, who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
Mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

We offer our richest gifts of prayer and praise, knowing them imperfect but trusting in the holiness of Christ to make them holy. As the Wise Men were led by a star to Bethlehem, so guide your pilgrim church to worship in holiness and bow down in adoration until the time when your purpose is accomplished.

hear our prayer

Give wisdom to the rulers of the world, that they may see the light of truth and follow the way of peace. Let them not be moved by fear or envy; make them ready to see you in what seems small and unimportant, so that your power is used not in pride but in service.

hear our prayer

As we have known the joy of Christmas and rejoiced in the gift of the Holy Child, may we now bring to him our gifts of love and reverence. Make our lives, in our families and in all our meeting with others, tokens of the treasures that in our hearts we offer to the Lord. *hear our prayer*

Look with mercy on those whose journeys through the world are long and who see no guiding star. We pray for those who are sick or suffering in this time of COVID-19, those infected in hospital, in ICU, those isolated at home; those of us living in fear and loneliness. Be with them. A quiet phone call at this time has more value than we realise. Be with all of us too as we live through this pandemic. *hear our prayer*

Receive the souls of the departed into the Kingdom where all journeys end and all worship is fulfilled in glory. As little Bethlehem was made great by the divine birth, so may those who were humble and unregarded in this world be numbered with the saints in heaven.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

May God the Father,
who led the wise men by the shining of a star to find the Christ, the Light from Light,
lead you in your pilgrimage to find the Lord. May God who has brought us out of darkness
give us a place with the saints in light in the kingdom of his Son.
May the light of the glorious gospel of Christ shine in your hearts and transform your lives,
to bring his light to others.

and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always.

Amen.