

Isaiah 60:1-6;

Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun; the glory of the LORD is shining on you! ²Other nations will be covered by darkness, but on you the light of the LORD will shine; the brightness of his presence will be with you. ³Nations will be drawn to your light, And kings to the dawning of your new day. ⁴Look around you and see what is happening: Your people are gathering to come home! Your sons will come from far away; Your daughters will be carried like children. ⁵You will see this and be filled with joy; You will tremble with excitement. The wealth of the nations will be brought to you; From across the sea their riches will come. ⁶Great caravans of camels will come, from Midian and Ephah. They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense. People will tell the good news of what the LORD has done!

Ephesians 3:1-12;

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, pray to God. ²Surely you have heard that God in his grace has given me this work to do for your good. ³God revealed his secret plan and made it known to me. (I have written briefly about this, ⁴and if you will read what I have written, you can learn about my understanding of the secret of Christ.) ⁵In past times human beings were not told this secret, but God has revealed it now by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. ⁶The secret is that by means of the gospel the Gentiles have a part with the Jews in God's blessings; they are members of the same body and share in the promise that God made through Christ Jesus.

⁷I was made a servant of the gospel by God's special gift, which he gave me through the working of his power. ⁸I am less than the least of all God's people; yet God gave me this privilege of taking to the Gentiles the Good News about the infinite riches of Christ, ⁹and of making all people see how God's secret plan is to be put into effect. God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, ¹⁰in order that at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms. ¹¹God did this according to his eternal purpose, which he achieved through Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In union with Christ and through our faith in him we have the boldness to go into God's presence with all confidence.

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. ⁴He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"

⁵"In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote: ⁶'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.' "

⁷So Herod called the visitors from the east to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and make a careful search for the child, and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹⁻¹⁰And so they left, and on their way, they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹¹They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.

¹²Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

Epiphany Sunday/ Plough Sunday

Who were the magi? Matthew says a lot less than we tend to think. He doesn't specify that there were three. He says that they came from the East, but not where they came from. Were they Parthians? Were they Zoroastrians? Does the nature of their gifts suggest their origin? Given the way trade worked, this is not clear either. Story and song has given them names, made them to be three to match their gifts, invented a fourth who got lost on the way and turned up some thirty years later, and made them wise men, and kings.

Matthew was a Jewish Christian writing a gospel for Jews, and neither he nor the first recipients would have thought much of the magi's wisdom or kingship. A foreigner's wisdom was nothing

if they didn't know the Lord God. And they certainly weren't wise enough or royal enough to make them *especially worthy* of God's favour.

Matthew doesn't have any particular reverence or respect towards kingship in any form, either. Herod seems all powerful, but is a phoney, and Matthew wants you to see it. The baby in a manger, six miles away is a truer image of kingship in every way.

Another thing: given that stars don't move, and comets don't stop over specific towns, it may be as likely that the star was an angel drawing the magi towards Bethlehem. A lot of stories, ancient and modern, have personified stars anyway — stories as far apart as Greek mythology and the film *Stardust*. What if that star really was a deliberate, thoughtful guide — an angel?

It is interesting that the magi should travel a long way, trusting and following their guide, and get within six miles of Bethlehem, but assume, at the last, that the new king must be in the larger adjacent city of Jerusalem. The star/angel has got them so far, but then they hesitate and trust their own instincts. Isn't that very human? When we have only one thing to guide us, we follow it. As soon as we get to a place where we think we have some reference point we start thinking we know better. I wonder if we're like that when following God's guidance?

Of course the key point about the magi's visit is the foreshadowing of the wider inclusion of all gentiles within God's grace — that all people are within the bounds of God's salvation. We only fully understand this after Peter's vision in Acts 10.

Let me contrast this with a modern royal occasion — the garden party. Royal garden parties are by invitation only — so far, so good: the shepherds and the magi came by special invitation. But what about dress code? We assume that magi who have brought very precious gifts must be richly dressed themselves. But the shepherds would have come as they were. They clearly were not wearing morning suits, as the dress code for a royal garden party specifies.

And what about the invitations? Royal garden parties are a means of recognising people who have contributed significantly in their local communities. They may not be viscounts or baronesses, but they are there by merit. And the guests at the manger throne? Well there were some notable *omissions*, weren't there? The guests were not the sort that would expect to be invited, are they? Were the shepherds especially worthy? Were the magi worthy? They *must* have been — *within* their culture — just look at the presents. But from a Jewish perspective, they possessed no rank worthy to see the messiah.

Nonetheless, they received the invitation, and they came.

And this is the real point — that whatever worthiness anyone may have by comparison with others in this life, nonetheless, they must bow to Jesus. No one is worthy enough. Rather, God's love and grace make all worthy, because worthiness is best measured by God's love. And God loves us all.

How did they respond? The Shepherds nearby just came. Quickly, joyfully, leaving their flocks behind. It was that kind of invitation — come now!

How did the magi respond? They set off ready for a long journey. They set off bearing costly gifts to honour a king. The Frankincense and myrrh were costlier than the gold. The magi gave their time, and costly gifts, and their homage.

How do you respond to the grace and love of God make himself known to you? Christina Rossetti puts it very well: 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 can I give him? Give my heart.

Amen.