

pierces the darkness that covers the earth
and signals the dawn of peace and justice.

Make radiant the lives of your people
with that same brightness,
and beckon all the nations
to walk as one in your light.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
in the splendour of eternal light,
God for ever and ever

Collect for The Epiphany of the Lord³

The Epiphany

6 January (or Sunday between 2 and 8 January)

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 60.1-6	The glory of the Lord will be seen over Jerusalem
Psalms 72.[1-9]10-15	Kings will pay tribute to the promised king
Ephesians 3.1-12	The mystery of Christ now revealed to the nations
Matthew 2.1-12	The visit of the Magi

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The visit of the Magi

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶And 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.'

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.' ⁹When 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

³ *Opening Prayers : Scripture-related Collects for Years A, B and C, from The Sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999. – (The ICEL Collects, 1997.)*

stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Liturgical context

‘Epiphany’ means ‘manifestation’ or ‘appearing’. In this feast of Christ’s nativity the focus is on his manifestation to the nations, those who have hitherto been outside the covenant relationship with God. The Epiphany season continues the Christmas theme of incarnation, but widens it to reflect on the manifestation of God’s glory in Christ, especially in the three stories of (1) the visit of the Magi, (2) the Baptism of Christ, and (3) the turning of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana. The Epiphany season ends at Candlemas, on 2 February (or nearest Sunday).

Commentary

‘King Herod’ is Herod the Great, ruler of Israel from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC.²

Magi is the Greek word Matthew uses, often translated as ‘wise men’ or ‘sages’. The Magi were astrologers / astronomers, making predictions about the future from their observations of the stars and the sky.

‘The East’ is a country beyond the Bible lands, it could be Persia (Iran), the country of Zoroastrianism, or further afield. Matthew is not concerned with the details of where the Magi came from or even of how many of them there were. Why does this not matter to him?

The idea of the Magi being kings comes from Psalm 72, which also says they come from Tarshish (in Persia).

The Magi are not only observers of the natural world, they also read the scriptures, for their mention of the star comes from Numbers

24.17.

Herod considers himself ‘king of the Jews’, but he does not seem very familiar with the scriptures, for he needs the advice of the scribes and priests (v.4).

The scribes and priests that Herod consults quote mainly from a prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Micah, 5.1 to give the name of the town of the promised king’s birth as Bethlehem (v.6).

Perhaps the Magi had been reading another prophecy, Isaiah 61.1-6, to help them decide what gifts to bring, as gold and frankincense are mentioned in this text as gifts brought by the nations who come to praise the glory of God in Jerusalem.

Why does Matthew omit historical details but include references to prophecies?

What was Matthew’s message to his community?

What is the message from this text to us today?

How does today’s scripture touch our own lives?

How are the themes from today’s readings expressed in the liturgy?

Quotations

1

God hides nothing. His very work from the beginning is revelation – a casting aside of veil after veil, a showing unto men of truth after truth. On and on from fact divine he advances, until at length in his son Jesus he unveils his very face.

George MacDonald

2

Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word glory a meaning for me.

The Four Loves / C.S. Lewis

Related topics

For further study:

Epiphany; Manifestation; Christology; Missiology

Closing Prayer

Lord God of the nations,
we have seen the star of your glory
rising in splendour.
The radiance of your incarnate Word

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² It was another Herod, Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea from 4 BC to AD 39, who was ruling at the time of Christ’s ministry.