

Epiphany

Date: 4 January 2026

Series: Let Earth Receive Her King

Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

“We saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship him.”

This is the first Sunday of the new year, and some of you may be wondering, why are the Christmas decorations still up? Isn't Christmas over? It's with some glee that Claire bought some hot cross buns on Boxing Day. I grew up Presbyterian and it was only through studying theology that I moved over to the Anglican church. But one of the reasons was because I'm a historian and I love the traditions that are preserved in Anglicanism. Traditions are living history. They contain the story of why we do the things we do. We're still in the season of Christmas because this ends with the festival of Epiphany on January 6. This was formally declared at the Council of Tours in 567, and this is where we get the 12 days of Christmas from. We're going to spend a few moments thinking about Epiphany and what it means for us today.

The word Epiphany means revelation. The early Christians actually started celebrating Epiphany before the tradition of Christmas arose. And this was because Epiphany was about the revelation of who Christ is: Immanuel, God with us. In the Eastern churches this often focussed on the baptism of Christ where we see the Holy Trinity revealed as the Father speaks from Heaven to his Son in the water, while the Spirit descends upon the Son in the form of a dove. In the Western churches the focus was on the visit of the Magi, which we see in our readings today, because this was a moment, fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament, when the nations, the Gentiles, first recognised Christ.

So our text for this morning is that well known scene from Matthew 2 of the Magi coming to worship the baby Jesus. We'll have a look at the Old Testament allusions that Matthew is drawing on for this episode; then the Political realities in the time Jesus was born and we'll finish with our Personal Response.

Old Testament allusions

It's interesting that the account of Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel sees things very much through Mary's perspective, whereas Matthew has things from Joseph's point of view. Matthew's Gospel

is well known as the “Jewish” Gospel, because he so often writes to show a Jewish audience how Jesus fulfills their Scriptures. And so here in this account of the Magi we find not only some direct quotes, but also allusions to Old Testament texts.

The first is from Numbers 22-24, where Balaam, a soothsayer from the East, in Jewish tradition a magi, foretells the coming of a great ruler out of Israel. The specific text is Numbers 24.17 which reads:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.”

Interestingly, Jesus is not the star itself, but the star points to him. But we can see how Matthew would have seen in this event a fulfilment of this verse.

A second text is from our reading from Isaiah 60, especially verse 3.

“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Again, this doesn’t exactly fit Jesus, because Isaiah is speaking about the city of Jerusalem rather than the person of the Messiah, but we can see how Matthew and the early church saw this moment fulfilling Isaiah’s words.

Then we have the text quoted by the chief priests and teachers of the law when Herod asked them where the Messiah would be born.

‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

This is in fact a composite quote. In the main it is from Micah 5.2 which reads:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you shall come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

But as Matthew quotes them, the chief priests and teachers of law take a flexible Midrash reading of this text. They change “Ephrathah”, an ancient name for Bethlehem, to “in the land of Judah”. “Least” becomes “by no means least”, and “clans” becomes “rulers” (that is leaders of clans), to make Micah’s meaning more pointed.

The final line of Micah's prophecy is replaced by another Old Testament quote, this time from 2 Samuel 5.2 where the tribes of Israel quote the LORD as saying to David,

"You will shepherd my people Israel and become their ruler."

Matthew clearly sees all these texts as being fulfilled in this moment of Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi. Some scholars argue that Matthew's account is just a literary creation, designed to show Jesus literally fulfilling prophecy, whereas Luke's nativity is the one that records what actually happened. The problem for this argument is that with each of the Old Testament texts that Matthew alludes to, he has to adapt the text for the story he is telling. This suggests that he is constrained to be faithful to the eye witness accounts of what actually happened. He feels he can adapt the Old Testament texts because he sees them fulfilled in the concrete events he is recounting.

From the fulfilment of prophecy, let's turn to the political context for Matthew 2.

Political realities

It's in Matthew's account that we meet the paranoid and murderous king Herod the Great. We know lots about Herod from other ancient sources.

Before Christmas I talked about how the festival of Hanukkah commemorated the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes and the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem in 164BC. Judea had more or less been an independent kingdom since that time until it was conquered by Pompey in 63BC. In 41BC the Romans had appointed Herod as tetrarch over Judea, and then in 39BC he was proclaimed "King of the Jews".

In 40BC a rival to the Jewish throne had been installed by the Parthians. The Parthian Empire was Rome's great rival to the East. They had replaced the old Greek kingdom of the Seleucids and basically ruled over the old Persian empire. If you want to know more about them, ask Kamran! In 40-39BC they attacked the Roman province of Syria and pushed all the way to the Mediterranean, and as part of this they installed Antigonus II as king of the Jews and high priest in Jerusalem. Herod joined with Mark Antony and Cleopatra to fight against them, and it was only in 37BC that he regained his throne.

Now, why am I telling you all this about the Parthians? Because the Magi was a central part of the Parthian court. They trained members of the Parthian royal family and were often used as

diplomats and civil administrators. The body of magi were a kind of religious civil advisory council for the Parthian kings, and indeed they helped select kings.¹ This arrangement pre-existed the Parthian empire. In the book of Daniel we read of “magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers” being consulted by the king of Babylon,² and then when Daniel correctly interprets the king’s dream he is both made ruler of the province of Babylon, and placed in charge of all its wise men,³ that is, the magi. The Magi exit the stage after hearing from God in a dream, like Daniel.

When we come to the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod was nearing the end of his life. In 7BC he executed 2 of his sons because he believed they were plotting to kill him. Shortly before his death in 4BC he executed another son, and through his reign he had eliminated various other members of his family including his favourite wife. Caesar Augustus famously said it was better to be Herod’s pig than his son, which in Greek was a pun. The Greek for pig is “hus” and son “huios”, and of course Herod as a Jew didn’t eat pork.

When Herod hears these Parthian diplomats king makers have come seeking “the one who has been born king of the Jews”, no wonder Matthew records he and all Jerusalem were disturbed! Herod, viewed the baby as a potential threat to his throne, and all Jerusalem were no doubt worried as to what Herod might do. With good reason as it turns out.

What about the star? There have been various astronomical suggestions offered through the centuries. Origen suggested a comet. Others have suggested a supernova observed by Chinese astronomers in 4BC. Kepler in 1614 argued for a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. Jupiter signified ‘leader’, Saturn denoted ‘the Westland’, and Pisces stood for ‘the end of the age’. So this conjunction would communicate to astrologers ‘A leader in the Westland [Palestine] in the end days.’ Whatever the case, Matthew certainly saw this as a miracle, and the Magi, whose business it had always been to understand such astrological signs, acted upon its meaning. Come and worship the new born king!

Personal Response

¹ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/history-and-myth-in-the-epiphany-in-matthew-2/>, Chris Forbes, ‘Stars and Wise Men from the East’, in SSEC newsletter 96, August 2022, <https://mq-ssec.org/august-2022-copy/>

² Daniel 2.2

³ Daniel 2.48

And so we come to the personal response.

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Coming to worship Jesus is the theme in these verses. The text repeats the word three times. And it's a great word for us as we start 2026.

First, the wise men were overjoyed when they found Jesus. The Magi are the quintessential spiritual seekers, going on pilgrimage to find something that will satisfy the longings of the heart. They found their hearts desire in Jesus. We can be tempted to run after all sorts of things to fill the caverns of our souls. Work, family, food, entertainment, sex, alcohol, doom scrolling. The wise men teach us our true joy is to be found here in Jesus. If you are seeking, church is the best place for you to find Jesus. Come and have a chat with me, I'd love to help you on that pilgrimage.

Second, "They bowed down and worshipped him." These men were at the height of power, influence and respect. But when they came before Jesus they bowed and worshipped him. We live in a culture that values self promotion, that celebrates pride, that tells us we should bow to no one, that we are gods and goddesses. But God opposes the proud and exalts the humble. We will not know joy in our souls until we bow the knee to Christ, indeed is it only in worshipping him that we find our true joy. Will you bow and worship him this year? Will you let his light guide you? St Paul calls us, in view of God's gracious mercy to us in Christ, his full and free forgiveness and love, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to him, that this is our true and proper worship. That we should not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.⁴ Will you surrender to Christ, and let him direct how you use your mind, soaking it in his word? Will you offer your body in worship to Christ, that he may use your hands and feet and lips as tools for his service?

Third, "They opened their treasures and presented him with their gifts."

What gifts can you give to the king? Your time. Prioritising prayer each day. Worshipping with God's people each week. Your talents. How can you use the gifts God has given you to serve this

⁴ Romans 12.1

year, at church, maybe volunteering in the community, certainly at home and at work? Your Money. Investing in God's kingdom, and trusting he will provide for all your needs.

Finally, the Magi followed the light of the star to find Jesus. Jesus calls us to be the light of the world. This is our vision as St George's, to be the Light on the Hill. Your friends, your family, your colleagues, they may not see a start, but they do see you. How will you shine the light of Christ to them this year? You can do that by being present in their lives and being a person of love and care. You can do that by praying for them. And as you pray, why not ask for opportunities to shine like the star and invite them to come and worship Christ. That may be moments of sharing the hope you have in Jesus. It may be inviting them to something like Pancakes or even a Sunday at church. But you're the star those around you see. How can you point them to Jesus this year?

We saw his star and have come to worship him. May we walk by his light this year.