

God's glory revealed in Jesus

5 January (Epiphany)

BIBLE READINGS

Isaiah 60:1–6 (responsively)

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

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

Lift up your eyes and look about you:
all assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.

Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.

Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.

And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

[Matthew 2:1-23](#)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet Micah has written:

"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.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.’

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. When they saw the star had stopped, they were overjoyed. On entering 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. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of King Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

‘A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.’

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. When he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

MESSAGE God's glory revealed in Jesus

Welcome to the new year of 2025!

I wonder what the year holds in store for our community and the wider world.

We hope for peace and resilience but fear change and conflict.

But have you ever wondered why the new year starts on January 1st?

It wasn't always this way.

The Roman calendar on which our modern calendars are based, began on 1st March, which is why September through December are named as they are, representing the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th months of the Roman year (in Latin).

The northern hemisphere winter months of January and February were only added in later which is why February was duded with only 28 days ... all that was left over.

It was only in the 16th to 18th century that January 1st was officially designated as the start of the new year.

It may also surprise you that in the Orthodox Church, Epiphany rather than Christmas is the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus. As we'll see shortly, though, Epiphany had a wider focus than just the birth of baby Jesus.

Epiphany is a very old celebration ... but why is it important?

In the Western church, to which we trace our roots, Epiphany marks the visit of the Magi, the revealing of Jesus to the world through the magi who come to worship him.

The story highlights Matthew's theme that the good news about Jesus the Messiah is intended for the whole world. It's why Matthew ends his Gospel with what we know as the Great Commission:



*Go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptising them ... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matt 28:19-20)*

In the Eastern church – covering Greek, Serbian and Russian Orthodox churches as well as the Coptic church in Egypt – Epiphany is celebrated as a theophany – a manifestation of God – where it links together the birth of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus and the mystery of the incarnation – how God took on human form as described in the opening chapter of John’s Gospel:



The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

More on this perspective in a little while.

But first, a few thoughts on the wise men who appear on many of our Christmas cards as well as featuring in some Christmas carols.

In the original Greek New Testament they are called **magi**.

If it helps, you might like to think of them this way:

*mysterious
astrologers
guided by an
intriguing star*

The magi travel from the east – probably from Persia. Although they are often depicted as kings, it’s more likely that they were astrologers who spent time studying the stars. They have seen a new star which they interpret as marking the birth of a new king.

The coming of the magi bearing expensive gifts recalls the prophecy we heard from Isaiah where God’s glory and light rising upon Israel will attract nations

and kings who will bring gold and incense.

The gifts the magi bring are highly symbolic:

- gold – highly valued then as now – an appropriate gift for a king or Messiah
- frankincense – a prized perfume often burnt as incense – symbolic of Jesus’ priestly role and as one who connects us with God and who had a unique relationship with God who he called Father
- **myrrh** – a pungent oil – sometimes mixed with wine for numbing pain – as offered to Jesus on the cross – and used as a spice for anointing the dead. This gift points ahead to the death and burial of Jesus, pointing to his role as Saviour



The magi are overwhelmed with joy to see Jesus after their long journey and bow down to worship him.

At the start of a new year, an interesting exercise is to reflect on how we come before Jesus and what we might offer to him.

Do we come with joy and reverence like the magi or with a sense of familiarity?

Do we offer the best gifts we have available or give from what is left over?

The second part of Matthew’s story tells of the violent and ruthless response of King Herod, who ruled Judea on behalf of Rome. If there are stories circulating about a future ruler being born in Bethlehem, then all such potential rivals must be brutally eliminated. Such is the way of tyrants in every age.



Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt and like so many refugees in the world today, Joseph, Mary and Jesus must urgently flee from danger and seek safety elsewhere. Perhaps it was this formative experience for the family that helped shaped Jesus’ later views on treating others as you would like to be treated (see Matthew 7:12).

The implication for how Christians are called to respond to current day refugees and asylum seekers seems clear to me. Sadly, governments of both sides of politics often seem to act with cruelty rather than compassion towards refugees seeking safety and a future in our midst. Many asylum seekers have no work rights, no study rights, no access to medicare and no income support.



I wonder how many of us or other family members arrived here being some form of refugee or immigrant and how they were treated when they came? May we never forget that asylum seekers are usually desperate people in need of our welcome and hospitality.

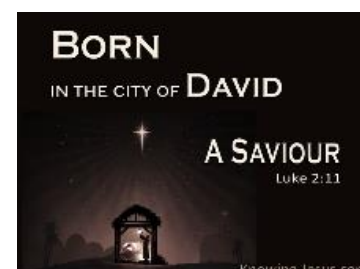
Praise God that there are organisations like ASRC – Asylum Seeker Resource Centre – who provide assistance and support. Speak to me if you are interested to know more about their work.

Returning to the origin stories of Jesus written by Matthew, Luke and John, each of them tells of Jesus coming as the promised deliverer and having mysterious origins in God, but each has a different emphasis.

Matthew highlights that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah or King born for the whole world. He is Emmanuel – God with us – and his authoritative teaching points to Jesus as the one whom we should listen to and trust.



For Luke, Jesus is the one who brings salvation and wholeness, a message of hope for the poor and all those who live at the margins of society. Simeon's message to Mary suggests that division and a violent end await Jesus.



John goes deeper and invites us to grapple with the idea that Jesus is none other than the Word of God or the **essence** and glory of God born in human form, and that Jesus is therefore both fully human and fully divine.



In Orthodox theology, this incarnation of Jesus is of great importance, as summarised in the statement by 4th century theologian Athanasius:

God became human that humans may become (like) God

Orthodox theology calls this lifelong movement towards God theosis. It's similar to what the apostle Paul called sanctification.

For us to enjoy a close relationship with God through Jesus, yes the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus are all important but the **incarnation** is vitally important.

The insight and wisdom of Orthodox theology is that every Christian, every follower of Jesus, is on a journey to become more like Jesus – reflecting more and more of the character of God in our words and actions and to live as part of a faith community that also reflects and is empowered by the three-in-one community of God.

This movement and journey towards God is only possible because of the incarnation, which is what we celebrate at Epiphany, God choosing to become one of us.

May that thought stir up our imagination and faith as we enter this new year.

The hymn that we're about to sing, written by NZ writer Shirley Erena Murray, invites us to be like the wise men seeking signs of Christ's presence in the world and seeing through these to what lies beyond and behind them and to bring our gifts – and our lives – in praise of what God has done.

HYMN Wise men came journeying (tune Bonnie George Campbell TiS 624)

Wise men came journeying, once, long ago,
camel hooves swirling the sand-dune and snow,
gold in the saddlebag, myrrh in the jar,
incense to honor the Child of the star.

Wise are the travelers led to move on
following signs where the Christ light has shone,

facing the deserts and crossing the lines,
heeding no limits that culture defines.

Wise are each one of us looking for change,
stargazer people, respecting the strange,
inner and outer worlds open to light,
centered on seeing the real and the right.

Wise ones keep journeying all through their days
bringing their gifts to the source of their praise,
risking the Promise with all they hold dear,
seeking God's peace at the door of the year.