

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. *(Isaiah 60 .1)*

Welcome to this reflection for the Feast of the Epiphany, the day on which we recall the Magi, or Wise Men, arriving to pay homage to the infant Jesus and bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - symbols of glory, prayer and suffering.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

God of gold, we seek your glory:
the richness that transforms our drabness into colour,
and brightens our dullness with vibrant light;
your wonder and joy at the heart of all life.

Lord of incense, we offer you our prayer:
our spoken and unspeakable longings,
our questioning of truth,
our search for your mystery deep within.

God of myrrh, we cry out to you in our suffering:
the pain of all our rejections and bereavements.
our baffled despair at undeserved suffering,
our rage at continuing injustice;
and we embrace you, God-with-us,
in our wealth, in our yearning, in our anger and loss.

Jan Berry (from Bread of Tomorrow, ed. Janet Morley, Christian Aid/SPCK)

Happy New Year! This year those words might jar a little. We said them this time last year, who could have known what the year held. A year of tragedy and suffering, bereavement and uncertainty. What does 2021 hold for us?

Of course out of the darkness of 2020 there were lights that emerged. Many communities came together in new ways to help each other, individuals and groups discovered creative skills, and we found that church meetings really don't have to be held in draughty church halls - but with a laptop in the comfort of your own home.

New Year is a time of beginning, like setting off on a new journey. The journey holds unknowns, there will be challenges, endings, beginnings and many a twist and turn on the way. Things may not turn out as we expect. The journey of The Magi was a little bit like that too.

Gospel: Matthew 12 .1 - 12 (NRSV)

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

6 "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." '

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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.' 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Epiphany means "making known" and the arrival of the Magi, who came from far beyond the Jewish world, symbolises the Birth of Jesus being "made known" to the wider world. It was entirely understandable that they, not being aware of Jewish scriptures, should seek out the birth of a new born King in the palace where the King would live. They wouldn't have been expecting to be sent on their way, to different town, and find the child in an ordinary house - with an ordinary couple. Then their plans had to change again - re-routed on their homeward journey - to avoid the ire of Herod.

At the beginning of a New Year we are at the start of the journey too. What surprises will it hold? Where will be re-routed? The Magi journeyed with gold, frankincense and myrrh. We do we take on the journey?

Those first visitors

When those first visitors came to you, Lord,
they brought gifts to lay at your feet.
But it was they who left the richer for having seen you.
Our gifts are not those of kings
but we offer them now
with that same awe and expectation believing they, as we,
may be worthy to be used for your work in the world.
We are not as wise as we would like to be,
yet we offer you ourselves,
all that has gone before and all that lies ahead, in your service.

As we lay what we have
and what we are before you,
may our eyes look heavenward,
may our hearts rise in expectation
and may we, together,
be instruments of change and bringers of light in places of need.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Tina Kemp, Spill the Beans

As well as Epiphany, many churches will be holding Covenant Services at the start of the New Year. The Covenant Service started with John Wesley and is at the heart of the Methodist tradition, although the idea has even older roots. In the Covenant Service we respond to God's loving relationship with us, which God has freely given, by renewing our commitment to reflect that relationship by the way we live our lives. At the heart of the service is The Covenant Prayer.

The Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

I've added some study notes about the Covenant Prayer to the resource site but I suppose what leaps out at people when they hear the prayer for the first time is the line "put me to suffering". It doesn't mean that it's God's will that we suffer. It has to be read with the rest of the prayer - our relationship with God embraces all aspects of life, easy and difficult. We place all that we are, and all that we experience, before God in prayer. In love we place ourselves ready to journey in God's service, accepting through trust in God all that lies ahead. I'm reminded of the words of the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard.

"The function of prayer is not to influence God,
but rather to change the nature of the one who prays".

Soren Kierkegaard 1813 - 1855

Last week I encouraged you to leave the decorations up until Epiphany. It will soon be time to take them down. At Epiphany and beyond we are called to continue to make known the Christmas message of God-with-Us as we journey on into the unknown but always accompanied by God.

New roads

When the star had stopped and they had seen the baby they took a new road.
When the decorations come down and we have heard the story
we can take a new road.
New roads can be scary.
New roads are exciting.
New roads are risky.
It is time to go.
Star-maker,
Light-bringer,
Holy Spirit of adventure,
come with us today on our road. Amen

Ruth Burgess

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the resource site and page of study notes about the Covenant Service.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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Call to Worship:

Mountains and rivers
Islands and oceans
Children and lovers
Rulers and nations
All who live
All who breath
Give God Glory!

Exciting God
Glorious God
Wise God
Righteous God
Holy God
Covenant God
Baptise us with love!

Ruth Burgess - 'Hay and Stardust', Wild Goose Publications

Welcome to this reflection for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. That's an event that happened when Jesus was an adult. We've jumped some thirty years from last week's focus on Epiphany when the Magi arrived with gold, frankincense and myrrh. But the events are closely related. They are both about God being made known in Jesus and, through the Holy Spirit, God being made known in us too.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognise him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

From 'Alternative Collects', Common Worship, Church of England

Here's a couple of ancient documents. My Baptism Certificate from way, way back in 1961 and a copy of Pelsall Parish Church's Magazine from May that year. Both record my Baptism on 16th April - my mom's birthday. If you've been baptised maybe you have your Baptism Certificate or other proof of baptism tucked away in a drawer somewhere - or maybe you don't.

Most Christian churches do practice baptism but not all. Quakers and the Salvation Army are among those that don't. Among those that do some baptise infants and children, and some baptise adults who've made a conscious decision to follow Christ.

Here at The Cotteridge Church we accept all, baptised or not, including to receive bread and wine. The Quaker presence in this area is important to acknowledge and some with Quaker backgrounds worship with us.

Discussions and disagreements about baptism have too often been one of the issues that divide churches. Maybe the churches spend too much time arguing about baptism? We sometimes forget that it is the Holy Spirit that incorporates us within the Body of Christ that is the Church, not a human action administered with water. Water and the Holy Spirit, the latter in this case represented by a dove, are in today's Gospel reading.

Gospel: Mark 1 .4 - 11 (NRSV)

4 John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.' 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

It's only a few weeks since we heard a version of that passage. Then it was from John's Gospel, today for Mark. Then the focus was on John the Baptist, today the focus is very much on Jesus. Mark knows nothing about the nativity - or if he did he didn't think it necessary to mention it in his Gospel. The beginning of his Gospel is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He's probably in his early thirties, a carpenter but also, it would appear, already a Jewish rabbi or teacher. Now he puts behind him those years that are hidden from us and embarks on a new journey.

Am I ready?

Am I ready?

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to face the world:
to start a new career
of shaping people's lives
as I shaped the wood
in the workshop.

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to face the factions
clamouring for a deliverer,
a healer, a miracle worker,
a fixer of all their problems.

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to confront the sickness and evil,
the arrogance of the professional
peddlers of religion,
the obtuseness of friends and family.

Am I ready, Father?

The dove of peace descends
and I rise from the waters,
cleansed, cooled and calmed.

I'm ready, Father.
Ready as I'll ever be.

Carol Dixon - 'Winter', Ruth Burgess (Ed), Wild Goose Publications

John's 'baptism of repentance' called for people to confess their sins. Christian belief is that, whatever Jesus was doing in those hidden thirty years up to this point, he had nothing to confess. Why then be baptised by John? Now at the commencement of his public ministry Jesus shows that in him - Emmanuel, God-with-Us, the barrier separating creation and creator - however you understand that - had been broken down. The Word-made-Flesh stands with his people. Jesus is baptised as a sign that he shares their humanity, and they can share new life in him.

Look what you can be

Jesus said, 'Look what you can be:
you can be all that you see in me,
if you are born again of the Spirit
that soared over Jordan.'

Jesus said, 'Feel the Spirit blow:
give away everything; let go
safe in the circling power of the Spirit
that filled me in Jordan.'

And beside that birth
all the rest is worth
straw in the fields after harvest.'

Jesus said, 'Bend to the Father's will
as the grass blows on a windy hill,
full of the life and grace of the Spirit
as I was in Jordan.'

Jesus said, 'What if it ends in death?
Give Him your praise with your latest breath;
enter the light and joy of the Spirit
as I did in Jordan.'

And beside that birth
all the rest is worth
straw in the fields after harvest.'

Roddy Cowie - 'Winter', Ruth Burgess (Ed), Wild Goose Publications

Francis Asbury, Methodist preacher, presbyter and bishop, was born in Hamstead, Birmingham in 1745 and grew up in Great Barr and West Bromwich. Drawn by John Wesley's preaching he became a local preacher himself while working as a blacksmith.

Then, at the tender age of 22, he was appointed by Wesley as a travelling preacher. At 26 he travelled to America, where he remained for the rest of his life. Ordained as a presbyter, he later became a Bishop of the Methodist Church there and is recognised as a founding father of the USA. But in 1795, at the age of 50, someone was clearly questioning his background and so he wrote to his elderly parents in the Black Country and asked;

“I should be glad if you would take the time of my baptism from the Church register, that I may know it perfectly”. *(Letter to his parents, 30th October 1795)*

Evidently they failed to provide details in their reply, probably because they knew no such record existed. Historians have searched the church records all over south Staffordshire and nearby and no record has been found to exist. If Asbury hadn't been baptised it certainly didn't impede his ministry - he brought the good news to hundreds of thousands of people. His was a life chosen and marked by the love of God, so to is mine and yours:

Bathed in God's Love

*God said,
'You are my dear child,
chosen and marked by my love,
pride of my life' (Mark 1 .11)*

I can barely believe it, God,
that those words, spoken of Jesus,
affirmed by John the Baptist
could possibly apply to my life.
I am such a half-hearted, fearful follower,
you can't possibly want someone like me
in your glorious kingdom of love.

Yet at my baptism I was chosen and marked
with the sign of the cross -
a symbol of just how far your love would go
for me - your wayward child,
unworthy companion of Christ.

Loving Father God, parent of all,
help me rise from the waters of doubt,
to new life with Jesus.
Let me feel your Spirit hovering close;
hear your words of hope;
and know I am forgiven, restored,
and bathed in your amazing love for me.

Carol Dixon, from 'Conversations', URC Prayer Handbook 2021

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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Call to Worship

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down
and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path
and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

(Psalm 139 .1 - 3)

Welcome to this reflection where we'll hear about Jesus calling some of his first disciples. Jesus says 'Follow me' and they encourage one another to 'Come and see'. It's a journey that will both challenge and transform them as they seek out the truth about Jesus.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Living God,
in Christ you make all things new.
Transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From 'The Book of Common Worship', Church of South India

Anniversaries are always fruitful sources of themes for sermon writers. They are also treasured by stamp and coin designers. This year sees the issuing of a £2 coin to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the death of the author H G Wells. But the design of the coin has left the Royal Mint with, well I won't say "not a leg to stand on" because the truth is they have one too many legs!

The design of the coin shows one of the Martian machines from Wells' 'War of the Worlds' Wells describes a 'monstrous tripod' but the coin depicts not three but four legs. Add to that Wells 'Invisible Man' is shown with a top hat that in literature the character never wore. There's more. Around the edge of the coin is an inscription, "Good books are warehouses of ideas". There is a similar quote in a rather obscure book by Wells where a character says "Good books are the warehouses of ideals" where it's said as a suggestion that books are places where ideals can be hidden away - hardly the message the quote was presumably meant to convey.

Check your facts! Everyone who is entrusted with relaying information is told to do that and, on the face of it, with the internet available it should be easier today than ever. But what can we believe? How do we know what is true and what isn't?

Our Gospel reading today is part of the call of the first disciples. Jesus has just called Andrew and Peter to follow him and now he encounters Philip. But can they believe what they'd heard about Jesus? Could it be true that he's the Messiah? Surely not from Nazareth'. There's no internet for them to search, to find out the truth about Jesus they need to 'Come and see'.

Gospel: John 1 .43 - 51 (NRSV)

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' 46 Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' 48 Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' 49 Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' 50 Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' 51 And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

In the following poem the writer, Mary Hanrahan, a primary school teacher in the east end of Glasgow, ponders on what Andrew must have thought many years later when he recalled that day when he'd asked Jesus where he was living and Jesus' replied 'Come and see'.

Come and See (Andrew remembers) (based on John 1 .38)

I followed him. It was not far away.
 Ordinary. In fact, rather frugal.
 And yet, looking back to that fateful day,
 his presence gave that house an almost regal air I sensed
 but little understood.
 The table well-wrought, a few simple chairs.
 I only learned later his skill with wood
 and wondered if lifeless timber bears
 his mark as much as I do. My life's core
 changed that day. There were other rooms but none so
 clearly etched in my memory. That door
 led to another world. I had to go
 on following him. Left my nets behind.
 He called us to fishing of a different kind.

Mary Hanrahan - 'Barefoot and Buttercups', Wild Goose Publications

Rumours no doubt were rife. They always are when someone's 'made a bit of a stir'. Jesus had arrived on the scene and John the Baptist had proclaimed him God's chosen one. Was Jesus the Messiah? There were those who said he might be.

Andrew was one of those who wanted to find out more and asked Jesus where he came from. Jesus said, 'Come and see'. Andrew did, and he took his brother Simon too. As we heard in today's Gospel reading they were soon joined by Philip and Nathaniel.

All the Gospels agree that the disciples responded to Jesus call, or their own curiosity, with out hesitation. They lift their fishing boats and nets, the tools of their trades and followed Jesus. Would we respond without hesitation? For those first disciples who did it would prove to be a long and rocky road.

Would I have answered (StF 674) *(A hymn by Herman Stuempfle)*

Would I have answered when you called,
'Come follow, follow me!'
Would I at once have left behind
both work and family?
Or would the old, familiar round
have held me by its claim
and kept the spark within my heart
from bursting into flame?

Would I have followed where you led
through ancient Galilee,
on roads unknown, by ways untried,
beyond security?
Or would I soon have hurried back
where home and comfort drew,
where truth you taught would not disturb
the ordered world I knew?

Would I have matched my step with yours
when crowds cried, 'Crucify!',
when on a rocky hill I saw a cross
against the sky?
Or, would I too have slipped away
and left you there alone,
a dying king with crown of thorns
upon a terrible throne?

O Christ, I cannot search my heart
through all it's tangled ways,
nor can I with a certain mind
my steadfastness appraise.
I only pray that when you call,
'Come follow, follow me!',
you'll give me strength beyond my own
to follow faithfully.

Herman Stuempfle (1923 - 2007)

Jesus instinctively knew the disciples better than they knew themselves. He judged that Simon with all his faults would be a rock of support. He knew that Nathaniel was trustworthy, although Nathaniel didn't know how he knew that! Andrew, who'd called Simon, and Philip, who'd called Nathaniel had already shown themselves efficient evangelists - spreading the gossip about Jesus and bidding others to Come and see.

And what did they see? In conversation, in sharing food and enjoying each other's companies they found out who Jesus was and, even just as much a revelation, who they were, beloved children of God. They decided to stick around for a bit and see what happened but, when Jesus invited them to join him at a wedding they couldn't imagine what they would see (John 2 .1 - 11). Water into wine was marvellous indeed, but what is even greater is the change following Jesus can bring to the lives of the disciples, and to us.

Maybe Nathaniel was changed enough to leave his prejudice behind and realise that something good can indeed come from Nazareth!

Approaching God

We turn to you, O God,
and find you already coming to meet us.

You inhabit our hopes
with creative love;

you hold battered lives
in scarred hands;

you catch us up
to dance towards fullness of life.

We meet you, O God;
life giver,
heart changer,
breath taker ...

Sustain us,
heal us,
renew us

this day
and for evermore.

Rachel Poolman, from 'Conversations', URC Prayer Handbook 2021

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