

Epiphany of our Lord, Sunday 4th January 2025

Today's Readings

First Reading Isaiah 60:1-6

Isaiah speaks of God's glory arising among his people and the peoples of the earth coming to praise him.

Gospel Matthew 2:1-12

The wise men follow a star which leads them to Jesus where they present their gifts before the manger throne.

HOMILY *"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."* (Matthew 2:2)

I have always enjoyed, actually loved travel and been blessed to visit many corners of the globe. While studying Theology, based at Westcott House Cambridge, I took part in an exchange program between Cambridge and Rhodes University, based in Makhanda, formerly known as Grahamstown, South Africa. I spent 3 months living in The College of the Transfiguration, avoiding Cambridge in mid-winter! Back then there was little travel information available on the internet, so I was heavily reliant upon my *Good Travel Guide* to help me plan the way. Over that time, I made some wonderful, life-long friendships, and it was our adventures together that really made for a brilliant learning and life experience, travelling, exploring and learning. Guidebooks were helpful – but it was the journey with others that was transformational. In today's Gospel according to Matthew, we encounter the Magi, who use the stars above as their guide, as they embark upon a dangerous journey; their destination still to be fully revealed, but their study tells them to expect a Royal Palace and a new-born King.

We may wonder, how did they know a star indicated the birth of a king? Clearly this account is rich in mystery – but we may suggest that as astrologers with a love and knowledge of the night sky, and as scholars who understood sacred texts, they must have been aware of the great promised Messiah for Israel. Some have suggested a link here to Numbers 24:17, "I see him but not now; I behold him but not near— a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel," or perhaps the arrival of a comet in the night sky inspired their search? Whatever the initial motivation, they see a star rise in the east and begin their journey, which brings them to the great religious and trading city of Jerusalem, a melting pot of faith and power. Here the wise men enquire about the whereabouts of the new king, with their intention to worship the new-born child.

King Herod gives the impression he is interested, so with the help of his scholars (priests and scribes) suggests Bethlehem of Judea is the likely spot, the orthodox Jewish answer to the Messiah's place of origin, a connection with the line of King David of old. Herod then encourages the wise men to seek out the child and report back to him directly. Of course he does, because his concern is the impending threat this new-born baby could bring to his own political position, with the terrible "slaughter of the holy innocents" which we recalled last Sunday, after the magi have left tells us all we need to know about his ungodly motives.

The party make their way to Bethlehem and are thrilled when the star stops. These star-gazers must have travelled many hundreds of miles, carrying their treasures; gifts for a newborn King, following the stars like a guidebook, or internet itinerary, as they search for their destination. We are told they reach the house in which the Holy Family are staying (notice it is not described as a stable, and there is no Inn, no manger – as we find in Luke 2:7). None the less, they enter, kneel in homage before the child and bring out their offerings, indicating submission and allegiance (see Psalm 72:10 or Isaiah 60:6) – for these gifts are highly symbolic: Gold of royalty, Incense of holiness and Myrrh for embalming the royal dead.

This rather mysterious account ends with the wise men returning home without visiting Herod, after being warned ‘in a dream’ to go back another way. Matthew uses this metaphor of ‘dream’ to great effect while also indicating God’s activity. As with the star, there is mystery here too, as we are left to make up our minds about the origin of the dream, for unlike the Shepherds before them there are no Angels to show them the way. Perhaps they needed a lonely planet guide too?

Each of us is on a journey, whatever age or time of life we are at. I believe that God has brought us together here, at St James’ Weybridge as part of that plan, and what a joy it is to travel life’s journey with you. And God has given us the best possible travel guides to help us – not a star this time, but the gifts of his Word to teach us, the Sacraments to nourish us and the Holy Spirit, to inspire us as we journey on. It is up to us to study the bible and reflect upon it, perhaps in our small groups or as part of our Faith Confirmed Course, to meet regularly to break the bread – as we do here faithfully several times a week at St James’ in the Eucharist, and to discern the work of the Holy Spirit, who leads us as an inclusive community of love and fellowship. Indeed, like a travel guide, the bible, God’s Word, the Sacraments that feed us on our journey and the Holy Spirit, who guides us through the circumstances of our lives, are our star of Bethlehem, our lonely planet guide!

But we need not travel alone, and we bring things with us for the ride! The journey of the Magi concludes with the presentation of symbolic gifts. Each of us have gifts, unique and wonderful to us. We carry our gifts, talents and abilities along the road of life as we journey on. Sometimes we don’t even know we have them, and sometimes if we are honest, we choose to hide them away in our treasure chests. Our task then as we journey on is to offer those gifts back to God in thanksgiving for all the good things we receive along the way, and to share our gifts with others – here at St James’ within the community of faith. So this New year 2026, what gift could you offer from your treasure chest of life and experience, to help in the ministry, mission and community of Weybridge? May that be our New Year’s resolution 2026, that we may be willing to examine ourselves and ask, what gifts has God given me that I could share here, to God’s glory and for the building up of his Church?

Travel guides have changed as the internet has evolved. But for me there is something quite wonderful about having a plan, written down to follow, whatever the origin – a map, the majesty of the stars above, the scriptures. The information such a plan offers, combined with our gifts and experience, enables our destination to be reached, our community to flourish and our light to shine forth. What gifts will you resent before Christ this New Year? The poet Christina Georgina Rossetti wrote in 1904 in her popular Christmas Carol, in the bleak mid-winter:

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 I can I give him? Give my heart. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, January 2026