

Burley in Wharfedale, Menston & Otley. Jan 3rd 2021

Welcome

Welcome to worship, and a Happy New Year!

Many of us would have preferred to be together in person but we are grateful that technology allows us to come together online.

And a Happy Christmas too! Because we are still in the Christmas season, with today being day 10 of the 12 [Note to self: decorations come down on Tuesday night!].

On 6th January, the church celebrates the Feast of the Epiphany, the coming of the 'Wise Men' to the infant Christ. However, as that falls on a Wednesday this year, we will focus on this story in our worship today.

Call to Worship

A new year has begun. Let us leave behind all that is past, and walk together into the future. Let us trust in the God of new beginnings, and worship the God of fresh hopes.

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Recorded Song - Singing the Faith 175: 'Light of the world'

We continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus as we come to worship today.

Light of the world,
You stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore you,
Hope of a life spent with you.

*So here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you're my God
And you're altogether lovely,
Altogether worthy,
Altogether wonderful to me.*

Oh so highly exalted,
Glorious in heaven above.
Humbly you came to the earth you created,
All for love's sake became poor.

So here I am to worship...

And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.

So here I am to worship...

King of all days,

Prayer of Praise

God, you have made yourself known, but in a most amazing way, coming in weakness, in a tiny baby, you covered your glory and hid your greatness. God of mystery and surprise we praise you.

God, you have made yourself known, but in a most amazing way, in a dirty poor stable no one else wanted; you hid your wealth and infinite riches. God of mystery and surprise we praise you.

God, you have made yourself known, but in a most amazing way, born to humble working people, hidden in a simple life, and yet announced in the stars of heaven and visited by kings. God of mystery and surprise we praise you. Amen.

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Reading - Matthew 2, 1-12

Sermon

The sermon can be accessed on <http://www.burleymethodist.org> and the text is available at the end of this sheet.

Hymn Singing the Faith 227: 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning'

We reflect on the meaning of the Epiphany for us today, and seek the guiding star of Jesus for ourselves.

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Cold on his cradle the dew-drops are shining;
Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,

Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.
Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine,
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine?
Vainly we offer each ample oblation;

Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration;
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Prayers

For Ourselves

Lord of our journeys, help us this day to have eyes to see your leading, ears to hear your guidance, and a heart of courage, that we may journey faithfully and find your way – even when the path may seem difficult and dark.

Amen.

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For others

God of glory, we lay the gold of the world at the feet of the Christ-child, offering it for transformation:
from the gold amassed by selfish greed into the gold used with caring generosity;
from the gold wielded as an instrument of power into the gold given to victims of powerlessness.

We pray for those who have wealth and power... and for the poor and powerless...

God of glory, we lay our wealth and prayers at the feet of the Christ-child.

Jesus, Son of God: **Accept our offerings of love.**

God of glory, we lay the incense of worship at the feet of the Christ-child, offering it for transformation:
from the worship that gives us good feelings into the worship that encourages us to seek goodness;
from worship performed out of duty into worship expressing loving delight.

We pray for the worship life of the church... and for the worship of our everyday lives...

God of glory, we lay our worship and prayers at the feet of the Christ-child.

Jesus, Son of God: **Accept our offerings of love.**

God of glory, we lay the myrrh of suffering at the feet of the Christ-child, offering it for transformation:
from suffering that leads to bitterness and despair into suffering that finds comfort and hope;
from suffering that seems meaningless and futile into suffering that reveals and redeems.

We pray for those suffering in any way... and for those who suffer with them...

God of glory, we lay our suffering and prayers at the feet of the Christ-child.

Jesus, Son of God: **Accept our offerings of love.**

Amen

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honoured;
may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today the food we need.

Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us.

Save us from the time of trial; and keep us safe from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Hymn Singing the Faith 330: 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!'

The 'Wise Men' were overjoyed at the sight of the star leading them to Jesus. So let us too be full of joy as we look to whatever 2021 may bring, for the Lord is come.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove

The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love,

And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders of his love.

Blessing

Reflection: 'They were overjoyed at the sight of it'

Michael Noble

There were three words which stuck in my mind as we approached Christmas 2020, and which somehow seemed to define it!

The first word was, of course, *Coronavirus*, and the effect that it was to have on everyone's plans for celebrating Christmas this year, perhaps particularly the enforced isolation (either of necessity or self-imposed for safety's sake) which many have had to endure. This seemed all the harder because of the late change and reduction in what was permitted.

The second word was (perhaps, again, of course) *Brexit*, as we approached the end of the transition period without a deal with the EU, and with one seemingly unlikely to be achieved if you believed the mood music. But then, surprise, surprise, a deal of some sort was done right at the last moment, on Christmas Eve.

The third word (and perhaps not at all of course) was *Conjunction!* In the week or so running up to Christmas we were being told to look out in the sky, just after sunset for a few days, for the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. The two planets were in alignment and so showing to the naked eye as a star in the sky far brighter than normal. Apparently, it's been nearly 800 years since they were this close to each other in the night sky and thus so visible.

The timing of this regular conjunction has caused some to suggest it may have been the source of a bright light in the sky some 2,000 years ago and which could therefore have been the astronomical event that the Bible reports led the wise men to Joseph, Mary and the newly born Jesus, and which became known as the Star of Bethlehem. The Vatican has apparently decided that it probably was (which may - or may not - give it some credence for some people) – but we cannot be certain, not least because it's not at all clear in which year Jesus was actually born.

Be that as it may, Matthew's gospel tells us that there was a bright star which the visitors to Judea from the east had observed rising, and that they had worked out that it meant that a new King of the Jews had been born. The Greek word for these visitors can be variously translated: such as magi, astrologers, magicians, those who studied the stars – and thus wise men. The star is mentioned three times in the gospel account: first, when the star rises, as we have just mentioned, and then secondly when Herod asks the astrologers when it first appeared.

However, it was the third occurrence of the star that particularly struck me this year as I read the passage in Matthew's gospel. Some of you may have sometimes had the same experience, when you read what you think might be a familiar passage, that something new leaps out at you that you perhaps haven't noticed before.

Matthew records that "after hearing what the king had to say they set out; there before them was the star they had seen rising, and it went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. They were overjoyed at the sight of it, and entering the house, they saw the child..."

What had not really registered with me before was that the astrologers were not overjoyed at visiting the child Jesus (which was what you would be thinking would be happening, I guess), but were overjoyed at the sight of the star! They were full of joy because of the sign of the star, that was continuing to point the way to Jesus. They were full of joy, because of the promise shown by the star that they would find the child at the end of their journey. And it was a lengthy journey - one of uncertain exploration, and one of faith that they would arrive, and that they would arrive safely with their gifts intact, despite all the uncertainties of travel both at that time and to a foreign land!

No doubt the joy continued as they entered the house, bowed in homage and gave their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But we aren't actually told that by Matthew. The joy is in the sign, in the star.

That joy is perhaps related in part to the instruction given to the astrologers by King Herod, who tells them to “go and make a careful search for the child”. Their searching has been successful, as indicated by the star - which enables them to find the child. There has been joy in the journeying and searching, as well as in reaching the destination.

Today we find ourselves on the threshold of a New Year, probably one with a greater amount of uncertainty than we usually think about when one year turns into the next? We may feel as though there isn't a lot of point in making too many new year resolutions this year? There is perhaps a sense that we are less in control of where we are going – and where we might end up as 2021 unfolds?

We are unsure what will happen over the detail of the Brexit arrangements and what it will mean for the economy, for ‘the pound in your pocket’ for each of us (to use Harold Wilson’s famous expression from the 1967 devaluation of the currency); what it will mean for employment and financial security for the many – not to mention for the environment, for national security, and for many other aspects of our lives.

We are unsure what will happen over the Coronavirus pandemic and what it will mean for us and for the world – when will we get the vaccine, will it really work in all variants of the virus, will families and friends be able to meet again before too long, will we get back to church by Easter, what will the new normal look like later this year, how will poorer countries be helped?

We are very unsure as we look ahead. But let us reflect on the relationship between the twin uncertainties of Brexit and Coronavirus (and any other uncertainties which each of us may be facing individually at this time) together with the other key word for this Christmas period: Conjunction – the conjunction of the star of Bethlehem, and the journey of the astrologers which it illuminated.

The astrologers were full of joy, overjoyed, because of the sign of the star, that was continuing to point the way to Jesus. They were full of joy because of the promise shown by the star that they would find the child at the end of their journey. And it was a lengthy journey - one of uncertain exploration, and one of faith that they would arrive, and that they would arrive safely with their gifts intact.

Their joy was also related to the instruction given to them by King Herod, who had told them to “go and make a careful search for the child”. Their searching was successful, as indicated by the star - which enables them to find the child. There had been joy in the journeying and searching, as well as in reaching the destination.

At the heart of the Christian faith is this message of hope and promise.

In the midst of all the current uncertainties, and in the midst of what seems lengthy and sometimes perilous journeying, is the promise that Jesus is there wherever the journey of 2021 will take each one of us.

The promise is that, as we ourselves go and make a careful search for the child in our hearts and lives and see that we have the sign of God with us and to guide us, we will find that we will safely arrive and discover the real presence of Jesus already within us, whatever may happen next.

We can, with the astrologers, be overjoyed that we do have the sure and certain sign that joy has come into the world, and we can be overjoyed that nothing can take away that joy in our journeying into 2021.