



the Sunday focus

Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Happy New Year! Today's services are being conducted by Jim Couper and Frances Cunningham, as they look to the visit of the Magi to the house where Jesus was to be found.

Matthew 2:1-12 (“Visitors from the East”)

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

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.’ 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *We three kings of orient are*
- 2 *The first Nowell* (CH323)
- 3 *As with gladness men of old* (CH326)
- 4 *In the bleak midwinter* (CH305)
- 5 *Look forward in faith* (CH237)

In the Name of the Father and of

Today's sermon has been prepared by Jim Couper.

The Epiphany story we know so well is about the Three Kings or the Wise Men. Our first hymn today has all the elements of the story. The Bible has this story only in the gospel of Matthew Chapter 2. It says: "*Behold, there came wise men from the east.*"

Herod consulted his scholars and sent them on to Bethlehem. Matthew continues the story: "*Lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them. ... When they saw the star, they rejoiced.*"

We think of the Christmas stories as all happening at the same time. Our Nativity scenes and plays have the shepherds and the wise men all coming into the stable with Mary and Joseph – all together in the night when Jesus was born. But some scholars believe that Jesus may have been two years old before the visit of the wise men. This fits with Herod's massacre of all the children under the age of two.

Whenever it was, Matthew says:

"And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

Three gifts. And this number is why we usually think that there were three wise men. Legends give them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Some legends say that Caspar came from the far east, perhaps India or even China. He is said to be quite old. Caspar's gift is gold. Gold is, perhaps, the essential traditional stuff that money is. It's not so long ago that the world's financial systems were based on large piles of gold bars sitting in national bank vaults.

Caspar's gift of gold is a symbolic rendering to God of all the treasures of the world. It's what we do when we give our money or our time to God – we kneel beside Caspar in adoration.

The idea that the wise men may have been kings of some sort may come from Isaiah chapter 60:

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

Some of us may know these words also from a bass recitative in Handel's great musical work *Messiah*.

The Epiphany theme coincides with the new year. In our tradition we set quite great store by new year. But not nearly as much as, say, fifty or sixty years ago. New Year used to be much more significant in Scotland than Christmas.

When King George VI broadcast a Christmas message on the radio, to what was then the Empire in 1939, in the early months of the war he read a poem by Minnie Haskins. The title of the poem is "God Knows".

We are now living in a period of great trials in the life of our nation and of the whole world. Here is the poem that King George sent out by radio:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

The second name that comes to us from ancient legends is Melchior. It is suggested that he was a scholar from Persia and that he was a man of middle age. Melchior's gift is frankincense: an aromatic resin from a tree which is used in incense and perfumes. It has long been symbolic of God. So, when Melchior kneels beside Caspar to give his gift of frankincense, he is acknowledging the presence of God.

When we offer to God the prayers of our hearts, we kneel beside Melchior in adoration.

The third name which comes down to us from legends is Balthazar. He is said to have been quite a young man. Balthazar may have been a scholar from Babylon or Arabia. Balthazar's gift is myrrh: like frankincense, a resin from a species of tree. The two different types of tree that produce frankincense and myrrh are native to Arabia and northeast Africa. Myrrh was used as an embalming ointment and as an incense at funerals. It is a symbol of death. A strange gift to give to a small baby. We think of this as a symbolic foretelling of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

It's what we do when we receive Communion at the Table of the Lord. How often have we heard these words?: *This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood, whenever you drink it, do it in memory of me.*

How often have we said the words?: *Jesus, lamb of God, have mercy upon us.*

Whenever we remember Jesus, whenever we pause in our daily round and think on him, we kneel with Balthazar in adoration.

The legends suggest that the wise men all came from different places. But I prefer the way Henry van Dyke has it that they were all astrologers from Persia and journeyed together.

Three names, three gifts, three symbols of great meaning. They are all so well encompassed in the traditional carol, "We three Kings". It's not in our hymn book and we don't sing it very often. I remember the boys singing it in the evening in the darkened dormitory of my boarding school in the Himalayas in northern India when I was seven years old: *Glorious now behold Him arise; King and God and sacrifice; Heaven sings Alleluia! Alleluia! The earth replies.*

And so, we kneel with Caspar, and with Melchior, and with Balthazar, in adoration for the King. They found the King, and we can find him in every day. We kneel with them and offer such gifts as we are able.

And we finish with the star. There are many theories about the star of Bethlehem. Astrologers of old found great meaning in the configurations and movement of stars. Astronomers today have advanced many ideas. Was it an exploding star, a supernova? There is no such description in historical records. Was it a comet? Maybe – but comets have tails and again there are no records.

Was it a great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn? A conjunction is where the planets are so closely aligned that they appear to the eye as a single bright object. A great conjunction occurred in 1623 but so closely aligned with the sun as not visible in practice. Another occurred in 1226. But in the year 7 BC a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred. Three times, within a period of a few months, Jupiter and Saturn aligned appearing as a bright star. This fits with the date of King Herod's death.

And just two weeks ago on the evening of the solstice, 21st December, we had a great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. The star of Bethlehem blazed brightly for the world.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

And we also rejoice. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord,
you sent your son to guide us, your people,
as you sent a star to guide the wise men to his worship.

When we suffer from lack of direction,
may Christ's birth point the way forward.

Let it give us hope in the knowledge that he came
as a visible sign of your love for us all.

We pray for the well-being of the world,
that all leaders will follow the road to peace and justice.

May our communities and families welcome Christ into their lives
as they turn to him, the Guiding Star.

Shine your light upon us, around us and within us,
that we too, may be a light to the world.

In Jesus' Name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill wonders what 2021 might bring . . . :

No-one is going to forget 2020 in a hurry, and few will be sad to see its passing. It might have been a year when folk spoke enthusiastically about "20-20 vision" emerging in all sorts of areas from building international co-operation to starting up local climate responsibility initiatives. But no. Last year proved to be a time of frantic plan-changing and fearful worrying for everyone. And for many it meant loss in unimagined circumstances.

So what of 2021? After all the many uncertainties of this festive season, who can know? One thing is quite clear: the world will never go back to the place it was in March of last year. We may well negotiate a "new normal" but it seems impossible that this will be anything other than a "different normal" to that which was so familiar for so very long. Experts tell us that facemasks, hand-washing and periodic vaccination may well become part of life in certain situations and under certain conditions. We will need to wait and see.

For our congregations, we now understand as never before that the word "church" implies people, not buildings. Of course ,we want to get back to our familiar settings in Gladsmuir and Longniddry on a weekly basis, and it is my fervent hope that this will happen, with all sorts of activities restarting just as soon as is safely practicable. Again, we will hope for the best and work towards reaching our goals, with many new plans emerging too.

Right now at the turn of the year there is so much that can fill us with fear, yet so much that is able to give us hope in this terrible time. While we know that Covid-19 infection is hitting a peak with more increases in prevalence likely in days to come, it is with joy that we see the Oxford vaccine about to be rolled out not just across the UK but the globe.

As with so much in life, the bad and the good come up against each other. It is our role to pray passionately and to work hard for all that is godly and good. Look forward in faith ...