

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD – 5 JANUARY 2025



COLLECT

May the splendour of your majesty, O Lord, we pray,
shed its light upon our hearts,
that we may pass through the shadows of this world
and reach the brightness of our eternal home.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

READINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Initially, the Church in the West celebrated the nativity of the Lord on 25 December while the Church in the East celebrated it on 6 January. By the fourth century, both feasts were being celebrated in East and West. January 6 came to focus on the arrival of the wise men, that is, Christmas uses the Gospel of Luke while the Epiphany takes the Gospel of Matthew. One should not look for an accurate chronology in the Christmas season. We have already celebrated the feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December (it follows the Epiphany story); last Sunday, we heard the story of the Finding in the Temple (twelve years after the Epiphany).

An 'epiphany' is a showing or a manifestation. In the case of this feast today, the Christ is revealed to the group of wise men from the East. They are outsiders. It becomes a showing of Christ the Saviour to the whole world and a celebration of God's inclusive care for all people and all of creation. It rejoices in the seeker.

The star is a beautiful symbol for the Epiphany – light shining in the darkness. To follow a star is to dream, to have high aspirations. The feast offers promise and hope.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 60:1–6

Arise, shine out Jerusalem, for your light has come,
the glory of the Lord is rising on you,
though night still covers the earth
and darkness the peoples.

Above you the Lord now rises
and above you his glory appears.
The nations come to your light
and kings to your dawning brightness.

Lift up your eyes and look round:
all are assembling and coming towards you,
your sons from far away
and daughters being tenderly carried.

At this sight you will grow radiant,
your heart throbbing and full;
since the riches of the sea will flow to you;
the wealth of the nations come to you;
camels in throngs will cover you,
and dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
everyone in Sheba will come,
bringing gold and incense
and singing the praise of the Lord.

First Reading

This hopeful oracle speaks about a new age for a people who have been in exile and bondage. It is included here, no doubt, because its final lines may have helped shape Matthew's narrative in today's gospel.

The first two stanzas take up the Christmas theme of light rising in the darkness. This is firstly the stars and moon during the night, and then the increasing brightness of the dawn. These are visual and poetic images of the glory of the Lord.

Already by the second stanza there is reference to the coming of the nations, and this is further developed in the second half. All are assembling from far away, all the nations are coming together. This expresses the universality and inclusiveness of the revelation that we celebrate with the Epiphany of the Lord.

For a competent and well-prepared reader, the proclamation of this text will be a delight. As the picture is painted in words, we hope that both reader and assembly *will grow radiant, hearts throbbing and full... and singing the praise of the Lord.*

Responsorial Psalm Ps 71:1–2, 7–8, 10–13

R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

O God, give your judgment to the king,
to a king's son your justice,
that he may judge your people in justice
and your poor in right judgment. **R.**

In his days justice shall flourish
and peace till the moon fails.
He shall rule from sea to sea,
from the Great River to earth's bounds. **R.**

The kings of Tarshish and the sea coasts
shall pay him tribute.

The kings of Sheba and Seba
shall bring him gifts.

Before him all kings shall fall prostrate,
all nations shall serve him. **R.**

For he shall save the poor when they cry
and the needy who are helpless.

He will have pity on the weak
and save the lives of the poor. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

This is one of several psalms that are commonly called 'royal'. Israel's kings generally showed themselves to be flawed human beings, but these psalms idealise their role. The king was understood to represent the people before God and to rule over them in God's name. The royal psalms therefore really say more about God than the ruler.

Psalm 71/72 praises the king for his wise and right judgment, his promotion of justice for the poor and needy, and his care and protection for the weak and helpless. These are all attributes of the God whose rule the king is meant to mirror.

The antiphon adapts one of the verses to apply it to the Christ child and looks forward to homage of the wise men of the gospel.

The reader/cantor should be careful of the extra lines in verse three and, as for the first reading, check the pronunciation of the names.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians

3:2–3, 5–6

You have probably heard how I have been entrusted by God with the grace he meant for you, and that it was by a revelation that I was given the knowledge of the mystery. This mystery that has now been revealed through the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets was unknown to any men in past generations; it means that pagans now share the same inheritance that they are parts of the same body, and the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

2:1–12

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they told him 'for this is what the prophet wrote:

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah
you are by no means least among the leaders of
Judah,
for out of you will come a leader
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child,' he said 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

Second Reading

Paul is the great champion of the gospel outreach to Gentile Christians, that is, those with a pagan background instead of a Jewish one. This was one of the key pastoral decisions faced by the early Church – did Gentile Christians need to follow the requirements of the Jewish law? Before his conversion to Christ, Paul was an ardent defender of the Jewish law. But his pastoral experience led him to a different point of view. To read about this revelation to Paul of the mystery of salvation for all, have a look at the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 11.

In this reading, Paul explains his revelation in very clear terms: pagans now share the same inheritance, they are part of the same body, they have received the same promise in the gospel. This should be read clearly and emphatically. Don't skip over the repeated word 'same'. God's unconditional love for all people is still a surprising revelation for many people today. Paul's message needs to be proclaimed, heard and received.

'Men' should be read as 'people'.

Gospel

Camels and kings often appear on Christmas cards. Today the wise men appear in the Christmas crib. The gospel story says nothing about camels, does not call them kings and does not tell us how many there were (only that they brought three gifts). Read the story with fresh eyes.

It is an inspiring story of those who seek the truth, often despite considerable hardship. It is an exciting story of naivety and cunning, of deception and betrayal. It is a delightful and joyous story of a mission accomplished. It culminates with revelation, acknowledgement and adoration.

Reading this story convincingly presents some major challenges. The long quote from the prophet should be heard as a quotation. The voice will need to be dropped. Then the response of Herod: *...let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage* needs to be obviously ironical in tone. It should finish with a sense of wonder (except the last sentence which is matter-of-fact information giving).

In this narrative, Matthew identifies the Christ-child as the long-awaited messiah, he anticipates the apostles' mission to preach the good news to all nations (28:19) and, in an atmosphere of menace, he offers a premonition of Jesus' saving death on the cross.

BLESSING FOR EPIPHANY

May God, who has called us
out of darkness into his wonderful light,
pour out in kindness his blessing upon us
and make our hearts firm
in faith, hope and charity.

Amen.

And since in all confidence we follow Christ,
who today appeared in the world
as a light shining in darkness,
may God make us, too,
a light for our brothers and sisters.

Amen.

And so when our pilgrimage is ended,
may we come to him
whom the Magi sought as they followed the star
and whom they found with great joy, the Light from Light,
who is Christ the Lord.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Epiphany, Roman Missal p. 711)

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (NRSV)

Psalm 72.1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13 (R. see 11b+Ps 98.3c)

R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice. **R.**

In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth. **R.**

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service. **R.**

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy. **R.**

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

Surely you have already heard of the commission
of God's grace that was given me for you,
and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

In former generations
this mystery was not made known to humanity
as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets
by the Spirit:
that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs,
members of the same body,
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew 2:1-12

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.