



Jesmond
UNITED REFORMED
CHURCH

Order of Service

23rd January 2022

10:45am

Our Service is led by

the Revd Dr Peter Knibbs

Welcome and Notices

Time of Quiet

Call to Worship: By the mercies of God, let us confess our sins and present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, which is our spiritual worship.

Lord Jesus, illuminate the darkness of our hearts:

Lord have mercy, **Lord have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, open our eyes to your saving love:

Christ have mercy, **Christ have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, unstop our ears to hear your living word:

Lord have mercy, **Lord have mercy.**

Hymn CH4 (739)

*The Church's One Foundation is
Jesus Christ her Lord*

Prayer and the Lord's Prayer:

Almighty God,
whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness
sustain us by your mighty power;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

Our Father...

Introduction to the Theme:

Many churches celebrate the season of Epiphany that begins on 6th January with a focus on the Gospel opening up to all people, not just the Jews, as the Three Wise Men visit Jesus from afar. The season aptly includes a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that begins today, and our Bible readings today from the Lectionary reflect this theme.

The season concludes when Jesus is presented by his parents in the Temple and Simon proclaims that Jesus is both a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. So this morning, holding on to the proclamation from the opening hymn that 'the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord', I shall take us, as wise men and women of our own day, on a journey through Epiphany.

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 (page ??)
Luke 4:14-21 (page ??)

Offertory Prayer: Lord, accept your peoples' gifts, not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but hearts and voices raised in praise of Jesus Christ our light and our salvation as we give you thanks because you have revealed your eternal plan of salvation, and have shown us your Son Jesus Christ to be a light to the nations. **Amen**

Hymn CH4 (363) *We have a Gospel to Proclaim*

Sermon JURC 23rd January 2022

Three Wise Gifts (based on Nicky Gumbel's booklet "Why Christmas")

I can clearly remember what I was doing on 23rd January 1973. There had been snow, and this was not really good news for me as I drove with Jack Harper, my driving instructor, in his old style Mini, to take my driving test in Washwood Heath, Birmingham. Perhaps the poor conditions softened the heart of my examiner, and I was pleased to pass the test! Significant events stick in our minds. Here I am 49 years later pondering an infinitely more significant event that began when Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem and a succession of ordinary people started to honour him and give him their worship.

The story of the Magi has developed over the centuries from the Biblical narrative we read in Matthew's Gospel, into the romantic images we picture in our nativity plays. The Gospel tells of three gifts, but that does not necessarily suggest that there were three givers.

The notion of three kings, as opposed to three astrologers, has also developed over the years. These Magi may have been part of a royal oriental court, but it is Psalm 72 which speaks of "The kings of Tarshish and the isles rendering him tribute, and the kings of Sheba and Seba bringing him gifts".

It is association with this Psalm that leads to the well known Edward Hopkins hymn “We three kings of orient are”. Listen out for snippets of that hymn as we progress.

Putting popular legend aside, what the Gospel tells us is that when Jesus was born, a group of well educated astronomers and astrologers thought he was worth bothering with. They stopped everything and made a long journey to take him symbolic gifts, in fulfillment of prophecy found in Isaiah - “All those from Sheba will come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord”.

“Born a king on Bethlehem Plain, gold I bring to crown him again, king for ever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.”

The first gift was gold - a present fit for a King. The child in the manger was the King of kings and the Lord of lords. God Himself come to live as part of our world.

This is what makes Christmas infinitely more important and memorable than my driving test. We celebrate the birthday of the most important person who ever lived. We mark dates in our civilization as being ‘before Christ’, or ‘after the year of the Lord’.

But was Jesus, as many suggest, just a great prophet and teacher?

The twentieth century Oxford scholar and author, C.S Lewis wrote: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He did not leave that option open to us. You must make your choice - he was either who he said, the Son of God, or he was insane, or he was an evil deceiver.”

The life, the death and especially the resurrection of Jesus confirm his claims that he is God’s unique Son. The evidence for the physical resurrection of Jesus is compelling. The disciples found his tomb to be empty and his grave clothes collapsed. In the next six weeks he appeared to over 500 people, eating with them and being touched by them. The lives of the frightened disciples were transformed into those of brave witnesses even to the point of their own martyrdom. The Christian Church grew, and continues to grow at an amazing rate.

The wise men were right. Nothing less than gold would be suitable for this child.

“Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a deity
nigh, prayer and praising, all men raising, worship him,
God most high.”

But even if Jesus was who he said he was, why do we need him over 2000 years later? The second gift the wise men brought was frankincense, which was used in the temple as a symbol of prayer, and pointing to a relationship with God.

Christianity is first and foremost about relationships. It is about a person, Jesus, rather than being just a philosophy. It is about the most important relationship of all: our relationship with God. And as we remember in this week of Christian unity especially, our relationship with God links us inextricably to all other people who claim that same relationship. You and I were created to live in relationship with God, and until we find that relationship, there will always be something missing in our lives.

At this season, we remember the fact that Jesus entered our world in order to restore relationships - first our relationship with God, and then our relationships with others. This is how he supplies the answer to our deepest need. The foundation of this is indeed prayer.

“Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume breathes a life of
gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying,
sealed in a stone cold tomb.”

But how did he restore relationship with God? The third gift that the wise men brought was myrrh - a substance used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus said that his purpose was to ‘give his life as a ransom for many’. The cost of this gift was the life of Jesus, given freely for us in a painful and cruel execution. Jesus paid, by his blood shed on the cross, the ransom price to set us free. But perhaps you feel free already? So we ask, freedom from what?

Firstly, freedom from guilt. We have all broken God’s laws in thought, word and deed, and like it or not, we have conscience that tells us, even though we may suppress the message, we are guilty. Secondly, freedom from fear. Jesus defeated death when he rose to new life and so we now need not fear death, and this also sets us free from all other fears.

So if we are set free, what are we set free for? We now have freedom to know God. We now have freedom to love. We now have freedom to change and start to live our lives, with God’s help, in new and wholesome ways.

The wise men offered their gifts to Jesus. The gift that He offers us is forgiveness, freedom, and the potential to live a new life, filled with God's Spirit providing all that we need to live human life to the full. But like any gift, we can either accept it and unwrap it, or leave it unopened, and unaccepted.

Why would we do that? Here are some excuses people give to say 'No thanks' to Jesus and his gift.

- I don't believe there is a God.
- Even if there is, I have no need of God.
- There is too much to give up.
- There must be a catch.
- I'm not good enough.
- I'll do it later.

But for all who make excuses, others say 'Yes' and receive God's gift. There is no catch, none of us are good enough, we are not asked to do anything to earn God's favour. We receive God's free gift simply by believing that Jesus is who he says - King of kings, Lord of lords. We receive God's gift simply by saying sorry for all that we do that falls short of God's good plan for our lives. We receive God's gift by opening our hearts and inviting the Christ to come into our lives. And he will come. If wise men stopped everything to take gifts to the new King - shouldn't we?

"What can I give him, poor as I am?...
if I were a wise man I would do my part;
yet what can I give him, give my heart."

It is the wise thing to do. We shall sing now of that clear invitation from Jesus to each one of us to follow on the most exciting journey, following, like the wise men, the one who the Bible calls "The Bright Morning Star"

Amen.

Hymn CH4 (533)

Will you Come and Follow Me?

Prayers:

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom.
You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor,
sight to the blind,
freedom to the captives
and salvation to your people:
anoint us with your Spirit;
rouse us to work in his name.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to bring help to the poor
and freedom to the oppressed.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to tell the world
the good news of your healing love.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to those who mourn,
to bring joy and gladness instead of grief.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to proclaim that the time is here
for you to save your people.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Father, use us, unworthy as we are,
to bring in your kingdom of mercy, justice, love and
peace.
Empower us by your Spirit and unite us in your Son,
that all our joy and delight may be to serve you,
now and for ever.
Amen.

We are each offered God's gift of forgiveness and love and it comes with no price attached. Yet as we fall down before the King, as the wise men did, we cannot fail to hear His call to go into the world and make disciples of all people. Our closing hymn challenges us to respond to that call.

Hymn CH4 (251)

I the Lord of Sea and Sky

Blessing: Christ our Lord, to whom kings bowed down in worship and offered gifts, reveal to you his glory, and pour upon you the riches of his grace, and the blessing....