

**DATE: Sunday January 2, 2022**

**CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington.**

**SERMON SERIES. Christmas / Epiphany 2021 Series**

**BIBLE PASSAGE: Matthew 2:1-12**

**GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Epiphany**

It's still Christmas! The good news is that Christmas is a 12-day *season*, not just a day. There are 12 days of Christmas when we can be enjoying left-over ham sandwiches, left-over Christmas pudding, left-over Christmas chocolates, post-Christmas-Day-clean-up-and-put-away. 12 days of drummers drumming, pipers piping, lords a-leaping, ladies dancing, maids a-milking, swans a-swimming, geese a-laying, golden rings, calling birds, French hens, turtle-doves and a partridge in a pear tree. The 12th day of Christmas is January 5th.

Christmas ends on January 6th with the Feast of the Epiphany when we remember that the wise men came looking for the baby who was to be a king. The good news is that Epiphany is also a season just as Christmas is – and Epiphany season lasts for 8 weeks, right up until Ash Wednesday at the start of March this year. Thursday of this week is the feast of the Epiphany that heralds in the 8-week season

In Epiphany we sing the carol "We Three Kings Of Orient Are," or the hymn that we're about to sing, "As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold." Or "Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater Son" with its reference to the wise men in verse 3. "Kings shall fall down before him, and gold and incense bring..." On our mantle pieces we can arrange the Epiphany cards that people sent us at Christmas – the cards that show 3 wise men either on camels or at Bethlehem. For 8 weeks we can wear those paper crowns that we got in our Christmas bon-bons or crackers, because those silly hat things represent the crowns of the wise men (according to the theory that they were 3 kings). We can make a "King's Cake" - a fruit cake with little trinkets hidden within it like the threepences that used to be put in Christmas Pudding. Or with German people we can chalk our front doors with the Epiphany blessing – this year, "20 + C + M + B + 22".

Traditionally there were 3 wise men – and traditionally their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar – the C, the M and the B of the chucked blessing on front doors. The Bible tells us that they brought 3 gifts, and so to make it neat and to save fights, tradition says there were 3 wise men. But in Eastern Churches, tradition has it that there were 12 wise men.

There is nothing in the account from the Gospel of Matthew that implies that they were kings of any kind. The identification of the wise men as kings is linked to Old Testament prophecies that describe the Messiah being worshipped by kings in such a verse as and Psalm 72:10, which reads, "Indeed, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations serve him." Early readers reinterpreted Matthew's wise men in light of these prophecies and elevated the wise men to kings. By AD 500 all commentators adopted the prevalent tradition that the three were kings.

Apart from their names, the three wise men developed distinct characteristics in Christian tradition, so that between them they represented the three ages of people, and three geographical and cultural areas. In one tradition, Caspar is old, normally with a white beard,

and gives the gold; he is "King of Tarsus, land of merchants" on the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey. Melchior is middle-aged, giving frankincense from Arabia, and Balthazar is a young man, very often black-skinned, with myrrh from Saba (modern south Yemen). Their ages were often given as 60, 40 and 20.

The three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. Gold as a valuable, frankincense as a perfume, and myrrh as an anointing oil. The three gifts also had spiritual meanings: gold as a symbol of earthly kingship, frankincense as a symbol of heavenly deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death.

The full title of Epiphany is quite a mouthful – it is, “The Manifestation Of Christ To The Gentiles.” The birth of Jesus may have been thoroughly Jewish, but his birth – his incarnation – was for the benefit of all Jews and Gentiles alike. The shepherds were Jews, but the wise men were certainly not. Here, at the outset of the incarnational life of Jesus, were Gentile people coming to worship and adore him, just as the Jewish shepherds came and adored him.

And what do you reckon Mary and Joseph thought when they saw these important visitors kneeling before their baby, and offering royal gifts of gold, incense and myrrh? Did it bring back to Mary the words she had received from Gabriel, 9 months or so earlier? – “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.”? (Luke 1:32-33). Man oh man, the sight of these 3, adoring their child, must have brought back to Mary’s mind Gabriel’s words that she had pondered in her heart for these 9 months.

And here in Epiphany, right at the outset of the incarnational life of Jesus, we have the great missionary aspect of God’s love shown – that God’s love, and God’s Son, is for all the people of the world – not just the Jews. When you were in Sunday School did you sing the little chorus, “Jesus died for all the children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all, are precious in his sight. Jesus died for all the children of the world.” It’s a simple little ditty with a tremendous theological truth in it. Jesus died for all the children regardless of colour or race or creed. It’s an Epiphany children’s chorus.

And here, in St Matthew’s Kensington this morning, we have a visual demonstration of the truth of the season of Epiphany. Hardly any of us here this morning are Jewish – we are Gentiles, and as Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar bowed before the Christ child so many years ago, we were there, in them, too. And as we come to adore Christ this morning, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar are here in us. If we are Jewish, so were the shepherds, and as they bowed before the Christ child, we were there, in them, too., and they are in us today

The missionary work of our link missionaries ... the Rows in South Africa, and the Davises in Tanzania, and Maggie Crewes in Cambodia, and Frances Cook in Chile ... their work is Epiphany work, helping other Gentiles to see the beauty and the glory of Jesus, and bringing them, too, to come and adore him.

It's Epiphany this week— not a strange, exotic church season that has nothing to do with us, but a church season that has everything to do with us who are Gentile Christians. Let us join in the Epiphany hymn, the First Nowell ...and sing with all our hearts, 'Now let us all with one accord sing praises to our heavenly Lord.'" (1194)