

St John's service for 3rd January 2021

Welcome to worship with St John's at the beginning of this new year. At a time still filled with so much uncertainty we look to the one who is the way, the truth and the life - the one who is the light that has come into the darkness of this world - Jesus.

Song

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
You're altogether lovely
Altogether worthy
Altogether wonderful to me*

King of all days
Oh so highly exalted
Glorious in heaven above
Humbly you came to the earth you created
All for love's sake became poor

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

Tim Hughes © 2000 Thankyou Music

Prayer

Glory be to you God our loving Father who created us and who continually watches over us. We praise you God for you have loved us with an everlasting love and given us hope through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Glory be to you Jesus, our Saviour who came to live amongst us in uncertain times when there was little peace. Jesus who experienced life as we do and was subject to its trials and temptations and yet remained without sin. Jesus, who proclaimed the goodness of the kingdom and was even prepared to suffer and die so that our sins could be forgiven. Thank you Jesus, that you were raised to new and everlasting life which we are invited to share if we would only trust in you.

Glory be to you Holy Spirit, who breathes life into us and confirms us as members of the body of Christ, the family of God. Thank you Holy Spirit that you teach us, empower us and guide us as we journey through this life.

Glory be to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit - you call us into relationship with you and make that possible through your mercy and grace. Help us today to draw near to you in faith and trust and to renew our response and commitment to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Readings

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.

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.

Sermon

"We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star." For me those words always conjure up a picture of old velvet curtains and crowns made from cardboard and tin foil with children standing tall clutching their gold, frankincense or myrrh. All the youngsters seem so proud to be kings, they love the idea of dressing up and bringing precious gifts to the baby in the manger. There is something about this story that is intriguing and captivating whatever our age. There is something about these characters which attracts us. And I think it really appeals to many of us that these kings, these wise men would travel such a long distance and then pass the castles and mansions, the comfort and recognition of this world to go and present precious gifts to our Lord in the most humble of circumstances. However, we must resist the tendency to consider this story to be just a lovely legend as there is so much to suggest that such a thing could well have happened in that ancient world.

For a start, people were eagerly waiting for God at this time, they were looking out for signs of his coming and intent on seeing the words of the prophets fulfilled.

So - Who are these kings? Where did they come from? What are they all about?

The Magi were probably a tribe of priests being, in Persia, pretty much the equivalent of the Levites in Israel. They were teachers and instructors of the Persian kings - men of holiness and wisdom. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science and were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. At that time it was common to believe that the future could be foretold from the stars and that a person's destiny was determined by the star under which they were born. If there suddenly appeared a brilliant star, it would seem as though God had broken through the natural order to announce something, or someone special. There was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter just before this Christmas and it may well have been a similar occurrence that announced the birth of Jesus two thousand years ago. It was the profession of the Magi to watch the heavens so it comes as no surprise that they would have been very aware of the brilliant star and of its significance - that it announced the entry of a new king into the world.

Where did these magi come from? All the Bible says in Matthew's gospel is that they came from the East, but it could well be that Isaiah was foretelling the arrival of these wise men when he said, "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." Whether they came from Midian and Ephah and Sheba, or not, is unclear, as is the number of them - although we often hear mention of the three kings, the Bible doesn't actually tell us how many there were. What is clear is that they had made a difficult journey - long distance travel was certainly not easy in those days - so they must have made a huge effort, coming from foreign lands determined to find the child who was born to be king of the Jews - the one indicated by the star who would himself bring the light of God into the world.

What is this all about? It seems that we have wise, holy and learned men who were well aware of the darkness of the world around them and looking for a sign of hope that God would intervene. This awareness of the circumstances around them, coupled with the fact that they were alert and looking for something more, meant that they were well placed to detect a new light when it appeared in the world.

It is significant that these men were from a distant land. They were not Jews themselves and yet they came to pay homage to the one who was born King of the Jews - they were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. They are a sign to us that it was always part of God's plan to call all the world to worship him and to find redemption through him.

Who are these Kings? I guess you could say we are because in a very real sense everyone who has found salvation in Jesus is represented by those kings. Like them we have seen the darkness of our lives, and the darkness of the world around us. Like them we have looked to heaven for some sign of hope. Like them the light of Christ has shone in our lives and given us that hope. And like them we have sought out and found the one born to be King of the Jews, the one born to be the saviour of the world.

The same light which called those magi to worship Jesus, calls us to do the same. Maybe we should dust off those cardboard and tin foil crowns from our childhoods, and the imagination and trust that go with them, and like those kings, humbly approach the baby Jesus asleep in the manger.

Now it might seem like a long hard journey for some of us - to travel from the darkness of doubt and disbelief, following the light that seems so far off, but surely we can be inspired by those wise men who made the tremendous journey from the darkness of their distant lands, following the Christ light to find the new born king. Maybe too we can follow their example, in bypassing the mansions and palaces that the world holds in great esteem, attractive though they may seem, to find the only one who is worthy of our worship. Then like the wise men we can kneel before Jesus and offer him the most precious treasure that we could bring - we can lay before him our hearts, our love and our worship, as a gift to the one who gave his life for us. **Amen**

Covenant

As we begin a new calendar year it is our custom to reaffirm our commitment to Jesus - surely the best new years resolution we could ever make.

We recognise again God's readiness to enfold us in his generous love which is not dependent on our deserving and we have the opportunity to commit ourselves once again in responding to that love.

We use a form of words that many others will be sharing at this time of year, to reaffirm the covenant in which God promises us new life in Christ and we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God. Firstly we ask forgiveness for the sins that separate us from God.

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins.

We are sorry that we are often slow to learn from Jesus, reluctant to follow him, and fearful of what it will cost us. We are sorry that our worship is sometimes half-hearted and stilted, that there are times when we feel unable to join in fellowship and that we often hesitate to witness to all that Jesus has done for us. We are sorry that we sometimes misuse the gifts you have given us, evading our responsibilities and being poor stewards of your creation. God we are truly sorry for the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn, and selfish in sharing your love with others, and we ask your forgiveness now in Jesus' name. **Amen**

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Therefore to all who truly repent this is his gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven' - Thanks be to God. **Amen**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us again accept our place within this covenant which God has made with us and with all who are called to be Christ's disciples. This means that, by the help of the Holy Spirit, we accept God's purpose for us, and the call to love and serve God in all our life and work.

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own. Let us give ourselves to him, trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

Eternal God, in your faithful and enduring love you call us to share in your gracious covenant in Jesus Christ. In obedience we hear and accept your commands; in love we seek to do your perfect will; with joy we offer ourselves anew to you. We are no longer our own but yours.

I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.

May it be so for ever.

Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen

As we have entered this covenant not for ourselves alone, but as God's servants and witnesses, let us pray for the church and for the world.

Loving God, hear us as we pray for your holy catholic Church:

Make us all one, that the world may believe.

Inspire and lead all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world:

Establish justice and peace among all people.

Have compassion on all who suffer from any sickness, grief or trouble:

Deliver them from their distress.

We praise you for all your saints who have entered your eternal glory:

Bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray in silence for our own needs and for those of others...

Lord our God, you have helped us by your grace to make these prayers, and you have promised through Christ our Lord that when two or three agree in his name you will grant what they ask. Answer now your servants' prayers according to their needs; in this world grant that we may truly know you, and in the world to come graciously give us eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Now we come to offer our worship to Jesus, to recognise his care and provision for us and to offer him our love in response.

Song

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him; the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling, and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him; the Lord is his name.

John S B Monsell (1811-75)

Blessing

Wherever there is sorrow, wherever there is fear, wherever there is need, reach out in the name of Jesus, the light of the world, and may his joy and peace, his healing and compassion dawn through you, until morning has broken and the day of his kingdom is here.

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you,
the Lord look on you with kindness and give you peace, this day and always. **Amen**

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