

# Sermon on Sunday 5 January 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

*Isaiah 60. 1-6 & Matthew 2. 1-12*



## The Gifts of Epiphany

I hope you had a great Christmas and welcoming-in of the New Year. As wonderful as the celebrations have been, I have to say I'm kinda relieved to be back in a rhythm of ordinary time, after that disorientating period of Betwixtmas, where absolutely no-one knows what day of the week it is, never mind what day to put the bins out!

As we stand at the threshold of another year, it is, I think, the perfect axis to look both back and forward. It's a good time to reflect, hopefully with gratitude, on what this past year brought

and taught, the ways it deepened us through both its highs and its lows. For some of us there has been lots to treasure, many uplifting memories made, many reasons to be grateful. For others, our only gratitude, perhaps, is simply that it's over.

So, this New Year is a letting go, but, more importantly I think, it's also a time to entrust to God the hopes and dreams and uncharted territory of 2025.

For the Church, this is the season of Epiphany, which literally means 'revelation' or 'realisation'. And that's so apt for a New Year into which we step blindly, asking that as it unfolds, so our eyes will be opened to the Presence of God in each moment; trusting that, whatever happens, our God is with us and also ahead of us, waiting; both our journey and our destination.

Epiphany is the story of mysterious stargazers who, having studied the alignment of planets (the 'star' of the story), set off on a long and perilous journey to pay homage to a faraway newborn king, born not in a palace, it turns out, but in a very ordinary home. And this journey was a great act of faith, endurance and courage; a stepping into the unknown, a trusting that the stars had indeed spoken.

And these visitors, these magi, brought with them generous and deeply symbolic gifts. These famous gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were themselves epiphanies; revelations into both the identity and the vocation of this child. Gold, unsurprisingly, symbolised royalty; granted, a nobility of a very different kind. Frankincense spoke of priesthood, this calling to help others

commune with the great Other, the divine. And myrrh, which was simultaneously a symbol of joy and of sorrow; a perfume for the living and a spice for the dead.

These gifts, as well as being symbols of the life and mission of Christ, are also symbols of our own lives and of those things that we, too, might need to bring and leave at his feet.

The gold of our prosperity; our power, our roles, the things we cling to for security. The incense, the essence of who we are; our spirituality, our mindsets, our hopes and dreams.

And the myrrh of our lives; its joy and its heartache.

So, today is an opportunity, if we'd like to, to spend a few moments reflecting on what each of these gifts mean to you, in the hope that perhaps something new, something life-giving, will be revealed and gifted to us.

*And as we do, we're going to physically bring each of the gifts to the stable.*

The first gift was **gold**.

A moment then to think about those things that, like gold, are precious to us, beginning with our memories.

Which memories from this year past are most precious to you?

Which relationships do you hold most dear?

Can we give silent thanks for all that is gold, all that is precious in our lives?

And is there anything, perhaps, that is too precious; something that possesses us; something we guard or hold too tightly?

If there is, and if we're ready, can we surrender it, let go, even if just for a moment, into the hands of the One who understands?

So, Lord, as a New Year begins, we offer our gold, all that is precious to us and within us. We offer the best of us - our gifts, our compassion, our power - asking through us, enrich the life of Your world.

The second gift was **frankincense**, incense used in worship to symbolise prayers rising to God.

What do we pray for or long for?

What is our prayer for ourselves?

Do we still dream?

Do we long for intimacy of any kind? Connection with others, with life, with something greater, something deeper than ourselves?

Can we, in the silence, open ourselves to that possibility? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to welcome that love, that presence, give it room to live and breathe within us? 'God, we give you our dreams, our prayers, our longings and our love.'

The third gift was **myrrh**, used both as a perfume for happy times and as a spice to prepare the dead.

When, I wonder, were you last happy?

What are a few of the things from this past year for which you are grateful?

When did you last grieve for something or someone?

What parts of this year past do you wish to let go and let be?

Both the joy and sorrow, the light and the shadows, these are part of who we are now. Lord, may you deepen both our gratitude, and our compassion.

## **Blessing**

May your eyes be opened to the wonder of the daily miracles around you and your sense of mystery be deepened.

May you be aware of the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness can never put out.

May you be blessed with companions on the journey, friends who will listen to you and encourage you with their presence.

May you learn to live with what is unsolved in your heart, daring to face the questions and holding them until, one day, they perhaps find their answers.

May you find the still quiet place inside yourself where you can know and experience the peace that passes understanding.

May love flow in you and through you to those who need your care.

And may you continue to dream dreams and to reach out into the future with a deeper understanding of God's way for you.