

# **Sermon on Wednesday 8 January 2025**

## **by Rev. Bill Church**

### **Epiphany**

I haven't done a statistical survey, but looking at the Christmas cards I have received, there are two main categories - the seasonal and the religious.

The seasonal ones have robins or Father Christmas or Victorian snow scenes. The religious will have, of course, nativity scenes.

Many of those will include the three kings and others will have just the three kings, complete with gifts, camels etc. And no school nativity play would be complete without three kings and a lot of their hangers-on.

Is that right, given that Epiphany is twelve days after Christmas?

Scholars and pedants would say it is anomalous and wrong. But others, including me, think it is fair enough and gives a nice symmetry to the story.

There was not an editorial committee for writing the gospels, so, fun as it might be, we must not imagine Luke and Matthew meeting and Matthew saying: "Why don't you deal with shepherds, and I will put in the wise men."

But together they do give a balance of those who first greeted the Christchild.

The shepherds – poor, timorous, unlearned, Jews.

The Wise Men – rich (they must have been to afford the journey), confident (to have had the confidence to deal face to face with Herod), learned (both in astronomy and astrology, real study, even science, not the back-pages-of-a-paper stuff), gentiles (and the BCP subtitles Epiphany as “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”).

Matthew’s Gospel thus gives us an unstated number with three gifts - Gold suited to a crown or treasury, signifying a King; Frankincense like the incense used in the Temple (or in churches today) signifying a priest; Myrrh which was used to anoint the dead, signifying a victim.

These men came “from the east”, maybe Persia, maybe Mesopotamia.

So, how come the cards you got probably show three Kings?

Sometime in the early Middle Ages, in western Europe, the three became: Melchior from Persia bringing gold; Caspar from India giving frankincense; and Baltasar from Ethiopia giving myrrh (or variations, eg Caspar coming from Europe or the gold coming from Africa).

Why?

I am sure it was not an exercise in diversity, although it is now valuable for that (except, of course, that they are all men).

It may have been to point out Christ's universality, which is true.

It may reflect a suspicion of magicians or sorcerers.

I suspect it was to change the emphasis from wealth and learning bowing down to the Christ child, to highlight power submitting to Jesus.

It was an attempt to show that what was then dominant in society was still subject to the rule of Christ.

And at a time when both kings and popes were asserting themselves, the church may have hoped that portraying kings bowing down to the founder of the church would make a point about contemporary precedence.

So, in a world very different from the Middle Ages, what relevance do these three visitors hold for us, or are they just cheery figures on a Christmas card?

Well, they show an example of using their everyday activity to find and follow the way to truth and worship.

They persevered along a tedious and risky journey, past deserts and murderous palace intrigue, to find the true light.

When they found that light, they were moved to adoration.

They were generous with the wealth that they had and brought well-chosen offerings to God.

Well done, Caspar, Melchior and Baltasar, or whatever your names really were.

Lead us on!