

The Epiphany

4th January 2026



In this unusual rendering of the Adoration, the Three Kings presenting their gifts are treated as caricatures and the Virgin is not idealised. The work is composed from a high viewpoint, focusing attention on the Infant Christ on his mother's lap, at the exact centre of the picture. People crowd around them and there is little sense of depth or space. The elongated figures of the Kings are characteristic of a painting style that was fashionable around this time.

A figure on the extreme right wears spectacles. His presence may indicate that those around Christ are blind to his significance; Bruegel has used spectacles on other occasions to signify in an ironic manner the inability of the subject to see the truth. Most of the figures, in fact, appear to be gently mocked by the artist.

It is uncommon for soldiers to be included in a depiction of the Adoration. As in other works by Bruegel, their presence may reflect the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands at this time.

(Pieter Bruegel the Elder 1565) Text: National Gallery

In the name of the + Father
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

HYMN

1 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid.
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

2 Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
low lies his head with the beasts of the stall.
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
maker and monarch and Saviour of all.

3 Shall we yield him in costly devotion
rarest of fragrances, tribute divine,
gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
myrrh from the forest and gold from the mine?

4 Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
vainly with gifts would his favour secure.
Richer by far is the heart's adoration,
dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

5 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid.
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

The grace of God has dawned upon the world
through our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who sacrificed himself for us to purify a people as his own.
Let us confess our sins.

God be gracious to us and bless us,
and make your face shine upon us:
Lord, have mercy.
May your ways be known on the earth,
your saving power among the nations:
Christ, have mercy.
You, Lord, have made known your salvation,
and reveal your justice in the sight of the nations:
Lord, have mercy.

Absolution

May the God of all healing and forgiveness
draw you to himself
and cleanse you from all your sins,
that you may behold the glory of his Son,
the Word made flesh,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Collect of Feast of Epiphany

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
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

A Reading from The Old Testament
Isaiah 60 1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴Lift 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.
⁵Then 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.

⁶ 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.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

Psalm 72 verses 10-14

¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.

¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.

¹² For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.

¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.



A Reading from the New Testament
Ephesians 3 1-12

Paul's Ministry to the Gentiles

3.1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

HYMN

1 As with gladness, men of old
Did the guiding star behold
As with joy they hailed its light
Leading onward, beaming bright
So, most glorious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to Thee.

2 As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger bed
There to bend the knee before
Him Whom Heaven and earth adore;
So may we with willing feet
Ever seek Thy mercy seat.

3 As they offered gifts most rare
At that manger rude and bare;
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King.

4. Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

5 In the heavenly country bright,
Need they no created light;
Thou its Light, its Joy, its Crown,
Thou its Sun which goes not down;
There forever may we sing
Alleluias to our King

Alleluia, alleluia.

Christ was revealed in flesh, proclaimed among the nations
and believed in throughout the world.

Alleluia

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel is written in the 2nd Chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew beginning at the 1st verse. Glory be to thee O Lord

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² 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.”³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Gospel of the Lord
Praise to thee, O Christ

Reflection

At funeral services I always refer to the impact the deceased had on the lives of those who knew them, that they leave a legacy, a deposit in our lives which we can recognise and celebrate. Perhaps it helps to think what that might be and recognise it as such.

I acknowledge there is another side to this. We can be affected for years, if not a lifetime, by a 'legacy' that is negative, even destructive. But, gently leaving that to one side, what of the positive input others have in our lives? It need not be that we knew the person well or for a long time. Several of the people who influenced me I knew briefly and not that well, but their effect on me is disproportionate to the time I knew them.

The Very Reverend Neil Collings, late Dean of Edmundsbury Cathedral was one such person. I knew him when he was on the staff of Exeter Cathedral and was rather in awe of him. Although from humble beginnings he had developed a polished, articulate persona; no one read the scriptures in a service like Neil! He had an interest in art and would occasionally pepper his sermons with reference to a particular work.

One such occasion was Epiphany Sunday when Neil referred us to the painting by Bruegel above. My knowledge of great art was sufficient to 'cover the back of a postage stamp' as they say, but I was fascinated by the connections he made. He did not refer to the points given by the National Gallery above, apart from a comment about the spectacles, rather Neil concentrated on the central figure, the child.

The picture shows the offering of myrrh. The child recoils.

Other artists most usually picture the child asleep or reaching forward towards the gift. Bruegel had captured in this action the dreadfulness of crucifixion thirty-three years hence. Again, we must strip from the sanitised and overworked Christmas story all that which blinds us to what is really happening. Myrrh is a reference to death.

There is a rather extraordinary end to my story. Months later I visited the National Gallery for the sole purpose of finding this picture. My husband and I seemed to walk for miles from room to room without success despite following several directions, we just could not find it. We resorted to the restaurant for coffee. Looking up from my welcome cappuccino who should I see walking through the door but Neil. How unlikely is that? I immediately ambushed him, brought him coffee and told our tale. He offered to walk with us to the painting.

What struck me when rewarded by its sight, was its size, smaller than I imagined, and full of detail. The three of us stood before it for quite a while and then quietly moved away. It is a powerful thing.

In a search for faith, many people who go before us leave a trail, a legacy, which we can choose to follow as Neil did for me., "Look in other places (art) and learn with your eyes." Thus, Epiphany Sunday always brings this event and Neil to mind.

In the painting the central focus is the child, and the surroundings are contemporary to Bruegel. His characters are everyday folk, and it is geographically European. Imagine it painted now, everyone would be holding up their smart phone recording the event, which makes a remarkably interesting point.

No matter how many pictures we take, it is impossible to capture and preserve an event. The image is one dimensional despite any enhanced effects. It cannot hold the air, the space, the physical sensation. Worse, when we grab our phones, we divert our attention and lose the very thing we are trying to hold. Rather than fully engage in the unique, unrepeatable-ness of a moment we put between us and it an object through which it is filtered and detached. No matter how many times we view the image we cannot recapture what is transitory. We see but do not really see, the point Bruegel makes with the 'spectacled' man.

The word Epiphany means 'showing forth' a 'revelation' and Epiphany Sunday will usually emphasise two things. That the baby, the incarnation of God, comes to the world as a light of revelation, and that the presence of non-Jewish foreigners reveals that this child is for all the world; 'a light to lighten the gentiles' as the prophet Simeon says to Mary.

The journey of the Magi was into the unknown following distant signs and words. It was undoubtably long and hard but the draw of finding light and truth kept them going. Their search was rewarded but that was only the beginning for both them and the child. As with all the Christian Feasts, we must not just observe but put down our camera, take off our specks and look hard. What is this saying to me? How do I respond?

We too can make this journey, stumbling often, but not giving up; we too can find the child, light and truth in the person of Jesus Christ, and for us too, that is only the beginning of a further journey and a greater story.

The Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
 who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead, and buried.
 He descended into hell.
 The third day he rose again from the dead.
 He ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty.
 From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Intercessions

Let us worship the Saviour with joy
and make our prayer to our heavenly Father.

The Magi came from the east to worship your Son:
Father, grant to Christians everywhere
the spirit of adoration.
Lord of glory,
hear our prayer.

The infant Christ received gifts of gold, incense and myrrh:
Father, accept the offering of our hearts and minds
Lord of glory,
hear our prayer.

The kingdoms of this world have become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ:
Father, grant an abundance of peace to your world
Lord of glory,
hear our prayer.

The Holy Family lived in exile and in the shadow of death:
Father, look in mercy on all who are poor and powerless,
and all who suffer.
We remember those known to us in need at this time.
And we commit those who have died into your encompassing love
Lord of glory,
hear our prayer.

Your Son shared the life of his home and family at Nazareth:
Father, protect in your love our neighbours,
our families and this community of which we are a part.
Lord of glory,
hear our prayer.

Father, we rejoice in our fellowship
with the shepherds, the angels, the Magi,
the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph
and all the faithful departed.
In your unfailing love for us and for all people,
hear and answer our prayers through your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and for ever.
Amen.

May God the Father,
who led the wise men by the shining of a star
to find the Christ, the Light from light,
lead you also in your pilgrimage to find the Lord.
Amen.

May God, who has delivered us from the dominion of darkness,
give us a place with the saints in light
in the kingdom of his beloved Son.

Amen.
May the light of the glorious gospel of Christ
shine in your hearts and fill your lives
with his joy and peace.
Amen.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
enlighten you heart and mind this day and always. Amen

HYMN

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 wouldest 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!

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