



GRAY'S  
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## **Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024 – Epiphany**

**Revd Stephen Baxter**

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

In Britain The Feast of Epiphany is largely muted - overwhelmed by the collective Christmas hangover and the onset of January blues. There is however a wonderful array of traditional celebrations of Epiphany around the world. In the Near East there's a somewhat masochist tendency to plunge into cold water...in Russia cross-shaped holes are cut in frozen lakes prior to participants' taking a dip three times; in Istanbul, celebrants dive into the icy Golden Horn to retrieve a crucifix; in Bulgaria, as a twist before the priest throws a cross into the water, a band of pipers and drummers jump into the water and play.

Things are more to my taste in Latin countries – in Venice a good witch Befana brings gifts to children and ex-gondoliers race each other on the Grand Canal in witches' clothing; in Lima, the magi rather than Santa brings gifts and children leave grass and water outside for camels and 3 policemen dressed as magi ride through the streets; in New Orleans, King Cake parties are held.

So especially in Catholic countries, the giving of gifts is central. I thought I'd share with you a special gift I received. I happened to mention in a sermon in October how I craved a pink fez as worn by the colourful Reverend Hawker, vicar of Morenstow, Cornwall, who claiming it was approved by an orthodox church. I was therefore delighted to receive this at Christmas... probably need a haircut to help it fit...

The presentation of gifts by the magi is perhaps the most well-known aspect of Epiphany and dominates the many artistic depiction of the magi – from the magi in the mosaic in St Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna to the Adoration of the Magi by

Rubens in King's Cambridge. It seems to be all about the gifts. Incidentally, the Ravenna depiction of the magi is my favourite with the three magi sporting wonderful ornate tights or tight trousers...I mention them in the hope that they might appear as present next Christmas. I think I'll take this off – Tommy Cooper element may be distracting.

It is, I think, crucial to focus on the context in which the gifts were given in Matthew's glorious story, which in many ways acts as a prologue to his gospel. When the magi arrive at the house their first act – the reason for their journey – is to worship...literally to prostrate themselves before the young child. The magi, who are not described as kings, represented the best of Gentile wisdom and religion and were, many scholars suggest, Persian priests of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism...perhaps from Babylon, Jerusalem's former oppressor. These star-interpreting intellectual priests make the arduous journey to worship the King of the Jews, to pay homage to his kingship and, in acknowledgement, offer gifts.

The importance of worship is reinforced by the gift of Frankincense, traded in Arabia for over five millennia, a precious pure form of incense, used widely in worship. And giving of our best in worship...through our buildings, our music, our art, our liturgies...to spice and make special our worship and stimulate communication with our king. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, as JSB Monsell's hymn proclaims. Special, suitably spiced worship helps to inspire and energise us and send us back into the world to continue and apply our worship.

The Magi prove that God's spirit of wisdom can inspire and lead outsiders who can show the way. For their return journey the magi turn away from the darkness of the fashions of Jerusalem powers and have the courage to turn to another road, risking the repercussions from Herod's guaranteed raging.

Both established political powers and the religious powers in Jerusalem fail to turn to the light. They have too much invested in perpetuating the status quo and protecting their materially privileged existences. Revelation might upset the apple cart.

This magnificent story is really the prologue for Matthew's gospel written primarily for a Jewish audience. It announces that this child born King of the Jews is the King for

all – the offer of true eternal hope is offered universally. As with so many of the biblical stories, it is tantalisingly minimalist in detail.

In their acclaimed commentary on Matthew, the scholars Davies and Allison state that Matthew would have approved of Eliot's interpretation in his celebrated poem *The Journey of the Magi*. It certainly presents compelling projections of the challenges the magi may have faced.

Eliot explains the process of compiling the poem "I had been thinking about it in church and when I got home I opened a half-bottle of Booth's gin, poured myself a drink and began to write. By lunchtime the poem, and the half-bottle of gin, were both finished.'

A major influence of course was the opening of Lancelot Andrewes Christmas 1622 sermon:

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey...

Eliot suggests the reluctance of the magi to leave their summer palaces on the slopes, the terraces and the silken girls bringing sherbet; and he imagines the physical challenges of the journey and their internal doubts: At the end we preferred to travel all night,

Sleeping in snatches, With the voices singing in our ears, saying That this was all folly.

And finally Eliot speculates on the hardships of returning home, having turned to the light: "this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation."

The first word of Jesus in Matthew's gospel is turn.

Turning to another way inevitably has costs, challenges; turning creates times of doubt, questioning, regret. Our times of worship are crucial for the provision of sanctuary, celebration and inspiration – crucial to help us keep turning back to ways of the light.

Paintings of the adoration of the magi generally focus on the exotic, exquisite robes of the visitors, their gifts and the virgin and child radiating brilliant light at the centre. As Davies and Allison again observe, Leonardo's unfinished altarpiece in the Uffizi has an important background that depicts conflict, decay and chaos. Buildings are in ruin and there are horsemen jousting. The king sought by the magi is born into the darkness of the world and comes to convince us to turn to his light.

It's understandable to be apprehensive about the journey into 2024 with its bewildering array of uncertainties – developments in the wars in the middle east and Ukraine – elections affecting 49% of the global population against a surge in inward-looking short-termist populist tendencies.

Fortified by worship, the church and its members are required all the more to have the courage to turn to, proclaim and pray for the ways of peace, compassion, welcome, love of the other, love of creation.