

The Visit of the Magi
Feast of the Epiphany – 4 January 2026 (transferred)
Isaiah 60.1-6 & Matthew 2.1-12
by Ian Wallis

Before returning to St Mark's last summer, for a number of years, I had been taking services in various churches around where we live near Penistone. Through doing so, I soon discovered that pretty much every church has its own way of doing things, its own local traditions, which are never more in evidence than when celebrating one of the great liturgical festivals or seasons.

On one occasion, I arrived at a church on Advent Sunday only to encounter a full nativity scene, including baby Jesus, already installed and fully illuminated under the main altar. When I shared my bemusement over this puzzling Advent observance with one of the Churchwardens, I was informed in no uncertain terms that this was the way it was done here. Conversation over.

This was probably an unusual, certainly eccentric, example of local tradition. Sticking with this time of year, a variation that is far more common relates to the date on which the so-called wise men take their place in the stable, presenting their gifts. For some churches, it is on Christmas Day; for others, it is on the Feast of the Epiphany, 6 January, which we are celebrating today, the closest Sunday.

This disparity is not as inconsequential as you might initially think because it alerts us to a recognition that is now largely lost in western celebrations, namely, that, according to our earliest sources, the principal Christian festival at this time of year was not originally Christmas, which arrived later, but the Feast of the Epiphany. Even then, the first reference to Epiphany comes from the late second or early third century in Egypt (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.21) where the focus falls, not on Jesus' birth, but on his baptism as the occasion when, with the heavenly voice proclaiming, 'You are my son, my beloved,' his divine status is made manifest.

We have to wait another 150 years or so, after the Feast of the Epiphany had been adopted more broadly, before a secondary festival begins to emerge in the West, on 25 December, celebrating the nativity – a date owing more, believe it or not, to the assumed date of the crucifixion than to any rival pagan festival. With this development came a divergence in the meaning of Epiphany with churches in the East continuing to focus on Jesus' baptism, while those in the West opted for the visitation of the Magi – a divergence that remains the case.

Here ends a rather longwinded explanation for why those oriental sojourners should only make their way into the nativity scene on the Feast of the Epiphany. For those of us still awake, however, a related matter immediately presents itself, namely, Who were they? Matthew, the only Evangelist to mention them, describes ‘Magi from the East’ (*magoi apo anatólôn*) – priestly sages specialising in astrology, dream interpretation and the like, although they would later be portrayed as kings, their number would vary from two to twelve, and, by the eighth century, they are both named and characterful – Balthasar, Gaspar and Melchior, with regional variations.

At one level, all this speculation and embellishment is charming enough, but I suspect that much of it is motivated by a desire to historicise these characters and place them within a chronicle of what actually happened at the birth of Jesus. And this historicising process continues to this day, sometimes in the most unlikely of places.

For example, an article appeared in the December 2025 edition of the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* written by NASA scientist Mark Matney in which he proposes that the star leading the way for the Magi was none other than a comet recorded by Chinese astronomers in 5 BCE which, according to advanced orbital simulations, may have exhibited temporary geosynchronous motion relative to observers in Judea, thereby appearing to pause or ‘stand over’ a location.

Really! But are the Magi actual persons from the annals of history or are they imaginative characters within a theological narrative composed not so much to communicate what happened in the past as to commend Jesus in the present? It seems to me that it is far more likely to be the latter than the former. And if I’m on the right track, then perhaps the question to ask is not, ‘Who were they?’ but ‘What is their significance?’

To address this we need to bear in mind the function of the birth narratives found at the beginning of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels. Here it helps to remember that all four gospels in the New Testament are confessional literature – they were written by believers in Jesus either to strengthen or to encourage belief in Jesus. As such, they make no attempt to offer an impartial account of his ministry or an unbiased assessment of his worth. And one challenge they all shared was how to convince potential readers that Jesus was ‘good news’ for them – and this is what is going on in the birth narratives.

Take Matthew’s. It begins with a genealogy (I know, everybody’s favourite part!) which traces Jesus’ ancestors back through king David to Abraham. Why Abraham? Because he

is the proto-Jew who inherited the promise of blessing from God, as we read in the book of Genesis, chapter 12. Listen up:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (12.1–3)

Notice that the promise of blessing extends beyond Abraham's own people to embrace all the families of the earth – all nations. If you recall, Matthew's genealogy also traces Jesus' lineage through David, the archetypal Jewish king. Now around the time when Jesus lived and Matthew wrote, many Jews believed that God would raise up an anointed one, a messiah, who would be a descendent of David, to fulfil that promise God had made to Abraham centuries earlier.

So when Matthew begins his Gospel with these words, 'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham,' and locates the nativity in Bethlehem, the birthplace of king David (1 Samuel 17.12) and of his eagerly-awaited messianic heir (Micah 5.2), he is commending Jesus as the one who would bring blessing not only to Jews, but to everyone.

Then, just in case any of his prospective readers remained unpersuaded, Matthew emphasises the truly universal nature of the good news Jesus embodies by narrating how among the first worshippers of this new-born kingly messiah are foreigners who recognise in Jesus the fulfilment of their quest.

You see, Matthew recognised that without those Magi, the story of the nativity, set in a small Judean town, even when announced from the heavens, remains a parochial affair – good news for those Jews who can believe in Jesus. But with their inclusion, those Magi, embodying the wisdom of the Gentile world and its search for the sacred, paint Jesus onto a global canvas and underline his universal appeal. An insight that none other than the Venerable Bede articulates in a homily for the Feast of the Epiphany, composed in the early eighth century:

It is fitting that the Magi are described as three: one young, one mature and one old, in order that they may represent the three ages of the human race; and that they are said to have offered three gifts, by which they confessed the one Lord in three ways. Gold, because he was King; frankincense, because he was God; and myrrh, because he was mortal. They

are also said to have been of different appearance, one ruddy, one fair and one dark, so that they might signify the calling of all nations, and the gathering together of the whole human race in Christ. (Epiphany of the Lord 1.6, from Homilies on the Gospels)

So, spoiler alert, those Magi may well not have been historical persons, but they are authentic characters within the drama of salvation and blessing that begins to take shape once Jesus emerges from obscurity and, having been baptised by John, commences his ministry. They are authentic characters because they bear witness to all those non-Jews who have discovered in Jesus a source of wisdom to live by, as well as an energising sense of the sacred woven within the fabric of life. For those who, as TS Eliot expresses so powerfully in his poem, 'Journey of the Magi,' experience in Jesus both a death to 'the old dispensation' and a birth to a renewed way of being.

In this way, the Magi, representing the Gentile world, invite you and me to find our place within this drama – and to discover in Jesus an enduring source of life-giving wisdom and sacred presence.

I wonder if we would count ourselves among them.

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