Reflections on the 1st Week of Epiphany – by Fiona 6th January 2021





Photo: Fiona's Family Epiphany Star

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer regularly providing video resources. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone, we usually meditate at 7.30pm every Wednesday (in our own homes at present). The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer, which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn… all those from Sheba shall come.' They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord' (Isaiah 1:6).

The three-week season of Epiphany begins on the first Sunday of January with Epiphany being celebrated on the 6th. The word epiphany comes from a Latin word meaning 'to reveal' which implies that the truth was a hidden one.

At the nexus of the Epiphany story of the Shepherds, Wise Magi of the East, and the Christ Child, we have the unfolding of the Christian Story. This is now our own journey, the way for all that chose it. Guided to Gods Shekinah light, the eyes of our heart behold the Holy infant in the stable, there we encounter the very **Wisdom of God**. The **One** who called forth light on the first day, the eternal **One** created at the beginning, before the ages, is the same **One** who is the light of the world for all people (Genesis 1:3; Sirach 39:6; Sirach 24:9; Luke 2:40; John 8:12).

In the Christian Tradition, the Magi or wise men were believed to have been so transformed by the Glory of the Christ Child that they left Bethlehem for their own country 'by another road.' (Matthew 2:7-12).

The usual Christian interpretation is that the Magi are wealthy pagans who undertake an arduous journey to seek enlightenment. Having found God in the Christ Child, they became good Jews and returned to their home country 'by another road' to spread the good news of the Messiah.

I would first like to point out the uninformed arrogance and prejudice of this usual interpretation. Unlike the story of Israel's journey in Exodus, not much is said about the mission of the men from the East. Indeed, the Epiphany usually spoken of is the conversion of the Magi during their encounter with the Christ Child. Nothing is said about the learning of the Jew/Christian as a result of the Magi's mission? Whatever tradition we identify with are we willing to see grace and truth in the lives of our neighbours with different faiths/ values/ aspirations to ourselves? Let's take a look at the Epiphany story:

While the classic interpretation of the Epiphany may be true, I believe the mission of the Magi may have spiritual significance beyond their mysterious cameo appearance in Matthew 2. At the very least, the Magi give a polite reminder to the Christian institution that Jesus Christ, Son of God and his Holy family entertained both Jewish believers and fabled exotic Pagan astrologers from other 'nations' in the stable.

Firstly, if you have a family background in Christianity you often don't have to travel very far to practice your faith, although your ancestors may have travelled far, as was the case for the Israelite Jews. In Scene one of this story the Christ-child was first visited by the shepherds of the fields (Matthew 2: 1 – 12). The shepherds came from the nearby places surrounding Bethlehem and are believed to represent the Jews, people of Israel and Christians today. God finds us where we are and unlike the Magi, the shepherds were not called to travel far, perhaps an hour on foot. The Shepherds were shown signs and motifs which were familiar to their culture. 'An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them…The Angel said 'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Both angels and the coming of a Messiah were understood in Jewish culture.

The Advent of the Christ child was also revealed to the Magi or wise men. Unlike the Shepherds, we had good reason to assume they had a long and difficult journey. We have no idea how long the Holy Family was in Bethlehem. We do know Jesus could have been almost two years old by the time the Magi arrived at the stable, based on King Herod's decree that all infants under two should be massacred. The Magi were most likely from Mesopotamia/ Sheba (Psalm 72: 11; 15), a region of Persia about 1,200 km from Bethlehem. The journey that these Magi undertook was no last-minute city break. The Magi most likely journeyed for several months to reach the Christ child. Their journey would have been over almost unnavigable terrain in inhospitable conditions with little in the way of infrastructure during ancient times. The fact that they made it to Bethlehem was testament to their faith and almost as much of a miracle as the Christ Child in the manger.

According to the Book of Matthew, a bright star led the magi from the east until it stopped "over the place where the child was," and "upon entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother" (Matthew 1:24).

The magi knelt down for the baby Jesus, the first thing the magi do upon entering the stable and seeing Mary and the Child is to kneel and pay him homage. In other words, they give themselves. Only after this act of worship, only after giving themselves to Christ, do they present their gifts. The order of actions, homage first and gifts second, is significant. First, homage. First, worship. First, giving themselves. This is their first and best gift. Only then do they open their treasure chests and present their material gifts. The material gifts have both symbolic and sacrificial value. Each one tells us something about the Christ-child. We are told that Gold was precious and worthy of a king; frankincense was incense worthy of a divinity; and myrrh was a spice used in burials. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:7-12).

In Christian teaching these men are referred to as Pagan or Gentile foreigners, meaning not Jewish. Because of this, little is made of their personal qualities or Missio Dei, the mission of God and purpose of their journey. The Magi were already appointed by God as Isaiah said: 'A multitude of camels shall cover you. they shall bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord' (Matthew 2:11, Isaiah 60:6).

Based on what is known of their time, The Magi, Gods appointed missioners from the East would likely have been scholars of science, religion and philosophy. Their wealth would have enabled them (and possibly their household caravan) to undertake this long pilgrim mission. Second the Wisdom tradition designates a distinctive cultural tradition and scholarly activity in the history of ancient Israel, Egypt and Mesopotamia (The Nations), which

continues into in early Judaism and Christianity. In other words, the traditions of these ancient peoples infiltrated Judaism. In its original provenance the Wisdom tradition bridged religious thought across the Ancient Near East. Wisdom was a tradition of Macro Ecumenism, or inclusivity, a way of thinking and an attitude to life that emphasized love of God, humanity, experience, reasoning, and morality. In keeping with this striving for order and equilibrium, the wisdom teachers sought to provide rules and examples of personal morals and on a theoretical level, meanings and values through reflection and meditation. 'Wisdom' in this tradition is synonymous with 'understanding', 'insight', 'counsel', 'advice' and 'knowledge. One example is from Egyptian Wisdom, the Wisdom of Amenemope, is widely thought to be the provenance of a section of Proverbs (Proverbs 22:17-23). In the Christian/ Jewish context, Proverbs is concerned with a generalized religious element in Wisdom's recognition of the rightness of a certain order of life and the religious means by which to acquire it as delineated by personified Wisdom in the text (Proverbs 8).

So why did God choose to reveal his Wisdom to the Magi? Of course, we don't know the answer to this question. Rather than being unworthy, Pagan's it is clear God knew their value and chose them for his mission. The star based on the Biblical accounts was only visible to the Magi and they understood its purpose. The faith of the Magi helped protected the infant Jesus from Herod. King Herod of Judea was alerted to the Advent of the 'newborn King' by his advisors. Concerned to protect his position as King, what followed was the massacre of the Innocents, an order by Herod to execute all male children two years old and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:16–18).

The Magi's delaying tactics and Joseph faith ultimately saves Jesus. The flight into Egypt is a story recounted in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 2:13–23) and in New Testament apocrypha (Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew). Soon after the visit by the Magi, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus since King Herod would seek the child to kill him – Jesus' safety is thus assured by the faith of both Jews and Pagans.

Far from being heathen transformed by their encounter, it is clear the Magi had great faith before they set out. The Magi saw the star at its rising, undoubtably, they made their work one of faithfully waiting and watching while meditating on God's purposes, exactly the attributes Jesus later expected of his disciples at the Transfiguration following their vision of Jesus' Glory (Matthew 17:1-9).

There are many ancient accounts, Jewish and throughout the Near East, of stars heralding an important birth or event. In Biblical theology there is only ever one purpose behind revelation in the stars - God himself. Had the Magi been regular astrologers they may have believed the rising star to be an astrological anomaly instead of a sign from God. But, because of their faith, they saw God's wisdom in the star, the Glory of Shekinah, just as the disciples first did at the Transfiguration. The Magi undoubtably knew the perils of the journey ahead of them, yet what they exemplify is the desire to go. We have no idea what The Magi risked leaving behind in their mission to Bethlehem; what they encountered at the end is often what Christians choose not to see. Firstly, that God calls the people he chooses to undertake his task. Secondly, the longest, most difficult journey to Christ is the pilgrimage of the outsider, the foreigner, the one most far away from the Church, they are often among the most faithful as the Magi show. Thirdly, the greater one's faith, and the greater one's call, the longer the journey one is prepared to undertake.

The Magi represent the coming of Christ for the whole of humanity, believers, and unbelievers. Epiphany reminds us that our Christmas celebration is a Christmas celebration for everyone, because the baby Jesus belongs to everyone.

The purposes of God's Wisdom are recognised in the St Pauls letter to the Ephesians where he proclaimed his mission to 'bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the Wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known…in accordance with the eternal purpose that he (God) has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, following Jesus in his humble impartiality, may we reflect how we receive others, both Nations and neighbours in our own stable. How would we wish to be received in the stable of others? In this work, how will we make the Wisdom of God known?

Beginning Meditation: Let us prepare now for our meditation. Notice any tightness in your shoulders and neck and allow any tension in your muscles to relax. Allow your back to rest upright. Be conscious of where your body is touching the chair. Allow your breathing to settle, allow your body to slow down. You may wish

to silently repeat a sacred word, bring to mind an image or simply focus on your breath as an aid to mediation.

25 mins silent meditation

Post Meditation Poem **'Noel of Kings,' a hymn by Louis Marie de Montfort, Founder of the Daughters of Wisdom** (Verses 2;7;9;12;13;15 omitted)

1. O great kings, do you see a brilliant star in the sky? How new it is! How mysterious! It announces that a Saviour has been born, Let us go, let us go adore this great Master. 3. We confidently follow this heavenly light And in its brilliance, seek the newborn Child. He comes from afar to show us his love, Let us travel far to show Him our love. 4. The star stops. What! At this poor place? Is it here our God is born? This can not be, it's beyond belief! Whatever, let's enter the stable. 5. Truly, here is the one we seek. He is our God; we shall dismount, halt, Lie prostrate at the feet of this infant, With respect, love and silence. 6. JESUS: O kings, you have endured much for me, I greatly admire your faith. Stand up, please come near, Come to me so I can embrace you.	8. All powerful King, deign to accept this gold, As true God receive this incense, As mortal receive this myrrh, 10. THE KINGS: Friends, do you feel the ineffable charm One tastes near this meek Saviour? Our palaces offer no pleasure Equal to our bliss in this stable. 11. Let us adore, adore this loving Lamb, Let us kneel, kneel at the foot of His crib. He is an infant, but adorable, He is wretched, but all lovable. 14. You raise up our hearts by your humility, You conquer them by your poverty; Let your victory reign over us, Bless us through your Holy Mother. 16. JESUS: Friends, go in peace with my blessings, Preach my name's glory everywhere, Believe in me, bring one and all to believe, And you will be great kings in heaven.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources:



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.