

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2022**  
**The Feast of the Epiphany**

**Collect**

Creator of the heavens,  
who led the Magi by a star  
to worship the Christ-child:  
guide and sustain us,  
that we may find our journey's end  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Ephesians 3:1-12**

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 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: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. 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, 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 to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

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

"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." '

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

## Sermon

It's fair to say that the question of leadership has been prominent in the press and social media over these past few weeks. Whatever our personal views, the leadership of our current administration has come under intense scrutiny. From a wide range of perspectives, opinions continue to be expressed about how to lead during a pandemic.

You may well have your own views about the kind of leader that the nation needs at this time.

In this morning's gospel reading, the familiar story of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus, we are faced with strikingly different images of leaders. The first is Herod the Great, King of Judea, a vassal of the Roman Empire. Historically, opinion is divided about Herod's rule. Support from the Roman Empire was important in enabling him to maintain control over Judea, and he was judged by some to be tyrannical and despotic. He lavished money on certain projects and was constantly concerned for his own reputation.

The first thing that we hear about Herod in this morning's reading is that "he was frightened". Frightened that wise men from the East want to come and pay homage to an infant. Already this begins to tell us something about the man. He is constantly alert to potential challenges to his authority – even if they come from the most unlikely places. Yet the overwhelming feeling is one of fear. He may have authority and power, but as a man he is afraid.

His response is to call together those who may be able to advise him where to find this potential threat. A couple of factors are worth noting. The first is the immediacy of his response. While we do not yet know what he has in mind, there is a sense that he feels threatened and wants to find a way to eliminate that threat – either by convincing himself that it isn't real; or by taking more drastic action. Second, he calls together "the chief priests and scribes of the people." We get the sense of a man who only needs to snap his fingers and the great and the good appear at his service.

Once he has received his information, Herod snaps his fingers once again. Just notice the verbs that are used. Herod "called for" the wise men and "sent them" to Bethlehem. His kind of leadership is about command and control. If he tells someone to do something, he expects it to be done, no questions asked. And as the reader already knows, he is not above a little duplicity, claiming that he wants to pay homage to the child, when we know that his motivations are far from pure.

If Herod is our first image of leadership, the second could not be more different. It is the image of "the child who has been born king of the Jews." And it couldn't be more simple. It is an image of an ordinary house in Bethlehem in which we find a mother and child. The house is marked out by two things. There is a star shining on it; and wise men choose to enter; kneel before the child and pay homage; and give gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

I wonder which are the most important features, marking out the differences of these two images. And I wonder what they might have to show us, on this feast of the Epiphany, which is all about being shown things.

Perhaps the most dominant feature of Herod is his desire to be in control. It is as though he is super-alert to any possible threat to his authority. And he has the machinery in place to seek to eliminate it. There is an irony, I think, in the translation we have of Herod's conversation with the wise men,

because it says that he “learned from them the exact time when the star appeared.” In truth, Herod isn’t interested in learning anything. He ascertains the facts that he needs, but his interest is in maintaining his own power, not in discovering more about the child. Herod’s rule is all about what he can command people to do. That is what gives him a sense of power. And while it may not allay his internal fear, it provides his response.

Control is entirely absent from the leadership we see in Jesus. He is, after all, an infant, and therefore entirely dependent on others. Nothing that marks out his leadership is sought out by him. The star marks out the house; and notice how the wise men are led there by a skill that they already have. The leadership of Jesus values all that individuals bring, in terms of their gifts and skills. Nothing is lost or rejected.

More than that, though, it is not Jesus – or even his mother – who makes claims about his own status. Rather, the wise men come of their own volition to pay homage. In the gifts that they bring, we learn something about the life that will unfold for Jesus. We cannot know whether they fully appreciated the meaning of those gifts when they brought them. Yet somehow, as the wise men allow themselves to react to and be changed by the sight in front of them, something is revealed. Whereas Herod seeks only to command and control, in this scene human beings interact, allowing themselves to be influenced and shaped by one another in a mutually fulfilling – and revelatory – way.

I wonder, when we think about our own views of the leadership that we see in our nation and beyond, do we allow ourselves to be influenced by the story of the Epiphany? Do we remember that something new has been revealed to us? Do we allow ourselves to learn its lessons afresh?

And there is one more thing, too. Do we remember to notice what it tells us about followership, too? Because we see an equally striking contrast between the followership of the chief priests and scribes, and the wise men. The first are as keen to maintain their status as the one they follow.

The wise men behave altogether differently. They have come to Jerusalem because they saw something in the stars, suggesting the birth of the king of the Jews. They are not Jewish themselves, but they probably were astrologers, and trusted their skills in reading something unusual; something which required a response. And it is their desire to pay homage. An act of humility.

In life we are often more in the position of followers than leaders. I wonder, can we learn from the humility of the wise men, and by joining in God’s story, allow our own lives to be transformed?

Amen