

**CALL TO WORSHIP** from Isaiah 9 and Psalm 96

Sing to the living God because the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. To us a child is born. He is named Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace. Let the heavens be glad! Let the earth rejoice! Sing to the Living God!

**Hymn Tell out my soul StF186 H&P 86**

<https://youtu.be/eqwoqRo9N6E>

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| 1 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord !<br>Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice ;<br>tender to me the promise of his word ;<br>in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.           | 3 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might !<br>Powers and dominions lay their glory by ;<br>proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,<br>the hungry fed, the humble lifted high. |
| 2 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name !<br>Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done ;<br>his mercy sure, from age to age the same ;<br>his holy name — the Lord, the Mighty One. | 4 Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word !<br>Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.<br>Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord<br>to children's children and for evermore !         |

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)  
Based on the *Magnificat*

**PRAYER**

Living God, we come before you with praise for you are in our midst, renewing us with your love and rejoicing over us with gladness.

You are here to bind up the wounded and broken hearted, to tell the lost that they are found and to fulfil your promises. We declare you to be our God and we your people. We rejoice that we read in the Scriptures that we are chosen people and that you have called us into your light, a light that darkness can never comprehend or overcome. Praise be to you for the light of the star that led Wise Men to see Jesus who was there before the foundation of the world, Jesus whose hands flung stars into space, Jesus who would surrender Himself to the hammer and the nails of the cross, Jesus who resurrected, ascended and glorified and who dwells forever with us. We ask that this morning we may have a fresh anointing of your Holy Spirit and know that we have been in the presence of you, our living God. Amen

**CHILDREN'S SECTION FOR THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE ONE. June's talk is also on video. Link to the children's song following on from the talk on YouTube is at the end of the talk script.**

Hello everyone! Some of you young people might be looking at me and thinking "Why is June still wearing her Christmas jumper? It's January 3<sup>rd</sup>!" Well, although for lots of people Christmas has passed, in the church it is still the Christmas season. January 6<sup>th</sup> is the day traditionally set aside for thinking about the Wise Men, the Magi, travelling to find Jesus.

I have made some arrows to help think about the story. You could make some easy ones, like I have. Here is one I made from a cereal box. ....

Firstly, I am pointing my arrow up. The Wise Men first knew something great was going to happen when they looked into the sky and saw a special star.

Now I am pointing my arrow across. As they travelled to see Jesus they would have had to look in front of them to make sure they were on the correct roads and be careful to avoid any dangers.

Lastly, I am pointing my arrow down. Baby Jesus would have been held by Mary or Joseph or be laying in his little bed so the Wise Men would have had to look down to see Him.

I have got more things for you to do with your arrow as the week goes on.

You could look out of the window and point your arrow upwards. You would most likely see rooftops of houses and you could thank God for all the warm homes that keep people sheltered from the bad weather. OR look at the tops of the trees and God, thank you that the trees gives homes to the birds. Or you could think of other things depending on what you are looking at.

You could point your arrow across from you are. You might be seeing a chair or your bed or something else in your home or someone in your family and you could thank God for those.

You could point your arrow down. You might see a pet dog or cat or a younger brother or sister and thank God for those. OR you might see something that needs picking up from the floor and you could pick that up and thank God that your arms and your hands work well.

Just as the Wise Men used their eyes to connect with God, so you can use yours this week.

So, get going with your arrows! Have a good week! USE YOUR EYES!

**(June puts on her glasses with the googly-spring eyes).**

SONG FROM YOUTUBE <https://youtu.be/jAh0avXdgJ0>

**Hymn Speak O Lord StF 161** [https://youtu.be/my90e3a\\_nlM](https://youtu.be/my90e3a_nlM)

**OR Lord, Thy word abideth H&P 476** <https://youtu.be/qcghwj7zZZg>

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| <p>1 Speak, O Lord, as we come to you<br/>to receive the food of your holy word.<br/>Take your truth, plant it deep in us ;<br/>shape and fashion us in your likeness,<br/>that the light of Christ might be seen today<br/>in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.<br/>Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us<br/>all your purposes, for your glory.</p> | <p>3 Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds ;<br/>help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.<br/>Truths unchanged from the dawn of time<br/>that will echo down through eternity.<br/>And by grace we'll stand on your promises,<br/>and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.<br/>Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built<br/>and the earth is filled with your glory.</p> |
| <p>2 Teach us, Lord, full obedience,<br/>holy reverence, true humility.<br/>Test our thoughts and our attitudes<br/>in the radiance of your purity.<br/>Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see<br/>your majestic love and authority.<br/>Words of power that can never fail ;<br/>let their truth prevail over unbelief.</p>                   | <p>Keith Getty (<i>b.</i> 1974) and Stuart Townend (<i>b.</i> 1963)</p>  |

**Reading:** Lectionary Old Testament Isaiah 60 verses 1-6

### Prayer

Living God, we thank you that through all generations you raised up people who glimpsed your glory, people like Isaiah whose message that our hearts will rejoice, gladden and light up our lives. We thank you for the wisdom that has been passed on to us by those who have faithfully followed Jesus, the Light of the World, witnessing to truth, bringing hope and encouragement. Thank you for every sign of your activity amongst us. As we hear this morning the way you used the light of a star to guide the Wise Men to Jesus, we ask that you likewise light up our lives so that we may bring others to see how your glory can be radiant amongst them. Amen

**Reading:** Lectionary Gospel Matthew 2 verses 1-12

### Sermon

When Nigel became Vicar of St Lukes and St Barts in 1999, a friend gave us a housewarming gift of a small house plant. For a while it lived on the mantelpiece in the sitting room. Over time, it grew well and I re-potted it several times. When we got to 2006, it was over 3 feet high and lived in a large pot on the floor next to the TV. Although its leaves were lush and healthy looking, the plant was leaning over and looked at collapse point! Nigel found a long stick and attached it to the stem of the plant with some string. Our then 3 year grandson came round. He peered into the plant pot. "Granny, granny, why is there a stick in the ground?" I explained to him that the 'stick in the ground' was keeping the plant upright.

As Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, is the date the church sets aside for the Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi, Wise Men, at Bethlehem to see Jesus, we are thinking about that today. Often our thinking and sermon reflection is about the symbolic meaning of the gifts they brought: Gold for a King, Frankincense concerning Priesthood, and Myrrh, associated with death. However, those gifts were also a 'stick in the ground' – the refugee family that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were about to become would find those gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh 'a stick in the ground' to hold them upright for the times ahead. Gold was the common currency and they would need money for housing, food and the general necessities of life. Frankincense, as well as its priestly uses, had medicinal uses for those who could afford it, used for lowering fevers and inhaled for chest complaints. Myrrh has antiseptic properties for treating sores and wounds. So, these three gifts were a 'stick in the ground' to them.

After we have heard the end of the story of the Wise Men at verse 12 in Matthew chapter 2 "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." We tend to forget about them, those Magi, those astrologers. Oh we remember story of their journey led by a star but the Magi as people who came from a life and went back to that life, what difference might THAT JOURNEY, THAT EXPERIENCE have made to them? And what can we take from that into our lives as we begin 2021?

When we think about sticks in the ground for us- what keeps us up from falling over spiritually and emotionally- we quite rightly would say- Oh its our prayers, our worship, our friendships, our family, the fellowship of the church, the people who care about us. Those things are the sticks in the ground that keep us upright. This morning we are going to look at two other things out of the Wise Men story that keep us upright, even if at first lookings at they don't seem to be likely candidates to be 'sticks in the ground'.

Both of those things we are going to look at as well as having their basis in the Matthew story, have links to the poetry of T S Eliot.

- This is the first and it is from Eliot's poem Little Gidding

**And what you thought you came for was only a shell, a husk of meaning.**

The Magi travelled in the belief they were visiting royalty. This is why they went to Jerusalem. It was not only the largest city in Palestine, it was impressive by the standards of the day. A city with about 100,000 inhabitants. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder who lived at the time of Jesus described it as the most famous city in the East, not just in Judea. The minds of those Wise Men must have been focussed on palace, servants, treasures as they asked the question "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

We can only imagine what they thought, perhaps what disappointment they felt, certainly greatly puzzled when the star led them to the humble place where Jesus was.

**And what you thought you came for was only a shell, a husk of meaning.**

To have come to a palace with servants and with treasures would have had a meaning, it would have been an incredible experience. But they came to a place where they could only hang on to the outskirts of its meaning. Did they glimpse something of the Glory of the Lord? Did they have any inkling that that as they knelt down, they were looking on the face of God?

We go about our daily lives. We do ordinary things. Sometimes we even do extra-ordinary things. But of this we can be sure. That once we set out on the journey to find Him who is born King of the Jews, what we perceive as the ordinariness of our lives is just the husk of the meaning that is contained within them.

Your life is one that no one else before you or after you can live because it is the life that God put you on earth for. You're not here by chance but by God's choosing. He chooses you to no one else because you are one of a kind. He has planned for you to be here at this time in history, to fulfil a purpose known perhaps only to him. Whatever you think your life is about, it is only a husk of meaning compared to how God views the worth of you.

That's a stick in the ground for you when you think your life isn't amounting to much and you wonder what difference it makes that you are here.

- This is the second thing we are going to think about from the Magi story and its from T S Eliot's poem The Journey of the Magi.

**We returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation.**

First, I have got a little story to tell you. I was teaching at a school in an area of deprivation. At the time of this story I had a mixed yr3 yr4 class – 7,8, 9 years of age. I had a lovely trainee teacher on teaching practice with me. She was a practising Muslim and completely delighted that her time at the school coincided with the R E curriculum for my class being Islam. On this particular occasion we were looking at the story of the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, when he had a vision in a cave. I had tried to set the scene for that by fixing up large pieces of cloth and having the blinds down across the windows so it seemed like we were in a cave. I told the story of how he had heard a voice saying to him 'You are the Messenger of God.' I followed up the story by asking "I wonder how Mohammed, peace be upon him, felt when he heard those words? Almost immediately, 8-year-old Ryan who shall we say was not noted for his engagement with learning, startled us all by jumping to his feet and shouting out "Oh my God, why me, why me, why me?" My Muslim trainee teacher then burst into tears and quietly sobbed throughout the rest of the lesson. She told me afterwards that she had suddenly felt a connection to God that she had never felt before. And time and time again afterwards, she referred to that lesson, speaking of it wistfully and saying over and over that there would never be such a wonderful R E lesson again although articulate as she was, she was unable to put it into words. Now of course we aren't Muslims but we as Christians can recognise that somewhere between the story and Ryan's response, the possibility of God speaking to people had become real to her. In the words of T S Eliot she had returned to her old dispensation but no longer at ease there.

We can't know how accurate T S Eliot was in describing the emotions of the Magi as they return home but my guess is, pretty accurate. An experience of God however we have it leaves us with a longing. A restlessness for more.

**We returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation.**

The writer to the Hebrews, in chapter 11 puts it like this:

*They confessed that they were strangers and aliens on earth. People who speak in this way make it clear they are seeking a homeland. They desire a better country, a heavenly one.*

So how is this a stick in the ground for you? When you have that longing, that restlessness, that dissatisfaction that is an **assurance** that you have had had a glimpse of the glory of God in your life. That God has been at work within you.

I end with this. I hope you will continue to think about the Epiphany story and the sticks in the ground that I have invited you to reflect on. But of course, THE stick in the ground is our relationship with God Himself. So, the words of Minnie Haskins as said by King George VI's at his 1939 Christmas broadcast.

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread with safety into the unknown. He said, put your hand into the hand of God and that shall be better for you than light and safer than a known way.*

**Prayer**

Living God, if we are travellers who have lost our way, set our feet on the path which leads to Jesus. If we are travellers who have lost hope, show us that our names are written on the palm of Your hand. If we are travellers whose deeds make us too ashamed to seek your face, open our eyes to see Jesus kneeling at our feet with a towel in his hand. If we are travellers who have turned away from you, show us Jesus the Door who stands with outstretched, nail scarred, hands of forgiveness.

Living 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 the last behold your glory face to face. Amen

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| 1 As with gladness men of old<br>did the guiding star behold,<br>as with joy they hailed its light,<br>leading onward, beaming bright,<br>so, most gracious Lord, may we<br>evermore be led to thee.           | 4 Holy Jesus, every day<br>keep us in the narrow way ;<br>and, when earthly things are past,<br>bring our ransomed souls at last<br>where they need no star to guide,<br>where no clouds thy glory hide. |
| 2 As with joyful steps they sped,<br>Saviour, to thy lowly bed,<br>there to bend the knee before<br>thee, whom heaven and earth adore,<br>so may we with willing feet<br>ever seek thy mercy-seat.             | 5 In the heavenly country bright<br>need they no created light ;<br>thou its light, its joy, its crown,<br>thou its sun which goes not down ;<br>there for ever may we sing<br>alleluias to our King.    |
| 3 As they offered gifts most rare<br>at thy cradle rude and bare,<br>so may we with holy joy,<br>pure, and free from sin's alloy,<br>all our costliest treasures bring,<br>Christ, to thee, our heavenly King. | William Chatterton Dix (1837–1898)   |

**Prayers of Intercession** (Adapted from Companion to the Common Lectionary)

God of journeying who has always led your people, we lay the gold of the world before you. We offer it for transformation from the gold amassed by selfish greed into the gold used for generosity; from the gold wielded as an instrument of power, into the gold given to the poor, the refugee, those who have little in a world of plenty. We pray for leaders of governments and those who influence the movement of money and employment..... Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of journeying who has always led your people, we lay the incense of worship before you. We offer it for transformation from worship that just gives us good feelings, into the worship that seeks your face, seeks your will and sees your presence amongst the ordinariness of life. We pray for Your Body, the Church..... Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

God of journeying who has always led your people, we lay the myrrh of suffering before you. We offer it for transformation from the suffering that leads to bitterness and despair into suffering that finds comfort, hope and peace. We remember before you those who have asked for our prayers..... and those who need our prayers.....and those who are travelling from this life through death and into the place where they will see you face to face in all your glory.....


**Lord's Prayer**

Hymn Hear the call of the kingdom StF 407 <https://youtu.be/WL-UdwB0Qvc>

OR Fill Thou my life H&P 792 StF 73 <https://youtu.be/fYvsiOhrVrs>

1 Hear the call of the kingdom,  
lift your eyes to the King ;  
let his song rise within you  
as a fragrant offering  
of how God, rich in mercy,  
came in Christ to redeem  
all who trust in his unfailing grace.

2 Hear the call of the kingdom  
to be children of light  
with the mercy of heaven,  
the humility of Christ ;  
walking justly before him,  
loving all that is right,  
that the life of Christ may shine through us.

*King of heaven, we will answer  call.  
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,  
filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim  
salvation in Jesus' name.*

3 Hear the call of the kingdom  
to reach out to the lost  
with the Father's compassion  
in the wonder of the cross,  
bringing peace and forgiveness,  
and a hope yet to come :  
let the nations put their trust in him.

*King of heaven, we will answer the call ...*

Keith Getty (b. 1974), Kristyn Getty (b. 1980) and Stuart Townend  
(b. 1963)

**SENDING OUT.** As we enter a New Year, hold fast to this: the babe in the manger was the Word made flesh, dwelling amongst us; That Coming One, that Saving One, goes with you now. There is nothing that can separate us from Him and with Him we will be more than conquerors.

**THE GRACE.** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be us all, evermore. Amen