

ORDER OF SERVICE

Sunday 3 January 2021

Welcome & Notices
Session Clerk: Keith Ferres

Prayer of Invocation

Hymn 50
In the bleak mid-winter

Young at Heart
Christine Bradbeer

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:1-12
Tibor Kosa

Hymn 53
Child in the manger

Sermon
Come to him
(by whatever route you can)

Prayers of Intercession
and
The Lord's Prayer

Hymn 63
As with gladness

Benediction
Threefold Amen



NOTICES

3 January 2021

The Wednesday Prayer Meeting is in recess till February.

Sunday 10 January 11 am Divine Worship.
All Welcome

For your prayers this week:

Congregational member: **Jim Evans**



Guests on Sunday 17 January will be
Greg and Mignon Goswell. Greg is the
Academic Dean at Christ College, Sydney,
and will conduct the service.



Ian and Rachel from Surrey Hills have been
working with Pioneers among refugees in Mid West Asia. Ian teaches
Mathematics to teenagers who are unable to attend school and
Rachel assists in the medical room of the centre. They are currently
home safely and with Rachel's family.



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GARDENIA ST.
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
BLACKBURN



HAPPY NEW YEAR

WELCOME

3 January 2021

EPIPHANY

"Come to him, by whatever route you can, and
with the best gifts you can find"



Which way from here?

"If you read the Bible carefully," said Professor David Hughes, "the Magi saw something when they were in their own country so they travelled to Jerusalem and had a word with King Herod." The Magi told Herod of the sign they had seen and, "when they left Jerusalem [for] Bethlehem, they saw something again".

Hughes's best explanation for this series of events is something known as a triple conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn - with the two planets coming close together in the sky three times over a short period. "This happens when you get an alignment between the Sun, the Earth, Jupiter and Saturn," says Hughes.

Tim O'Brien, associate director of Jodrell Bank Observatory in Cheshire, suggests this would have looked striking. "It's remarkable how much your attention is drawn when two very bright objects come together in the sky," he explains.

And once the planets lined up in their orbits, Earth would "overtake" the others, meaning that Jupiter and Saturn would appear to change direction in the night sky. "At that time, people would have set great store by the motions of the planets," says O'Brien.

Even more significantly, the event is believed to have been in the constellation Pisces, which represents one of the signs of the zodiac. You would [only] get a triple conjunction like this about every 900 years," he says, so for astronomers in Babylon 2,000 years ago, it would have been a signal of something very significant.

"A triple conjunction of this kind ticks all the boxes."

Victoria Gill, BBC News 2012

Come to Him.

Today we reflect on Epiphany, the arrival of the visitors from the East seeking "the king of the Jews".

Aster Aster is the Greek word for 'star'. The night sky has provided a source of great fascination for human beings down through the ages.

In the East the interest in the stars led to the construction of observatories so that the regular movements of the sun, moon and stars could be plotted on charts, and that calendars could be created.

In the ancient world Astronomy (the study of celestial bodies) and astrology (the alleged earthly significance celestial movements) were not differentiated. Neither were stars and planets! The Magi were scholars interested in significant signs in the heavens and any possible connection with earthly phenomena. The movement of the planets continues to fascinate people around the world.

Herod Herod the Great was a client king of the Roman Empire. As long as he collected taxes for Rome they sanctioned his rule in Jerusalem. He had the difficult job of maintaining political stability between Jewish and Roman societies.

William Barclay says he was a cruel and brutal man. "Herod had one terrible flaw in his character. He was almost insanely suspicious. He had always been suspicious, and the older he became the more suspicious he grew, until, in his old age, he was, as someone said, "a murderous old man."

Everything we read about King Herod in Matthew - his insane jealousy and the order concerning the children - fits with what we know from various Jewish and Roman sources.

Any other "king of the Jews" was a threat to Herod. His only interest was in eliminating any rival and threat to his own dynasty.

Pope Benedict wrote: "The reason why people persecute the church is that they can tolerate no kingdoms but their own."

One phrase (of hundreds) in a recent report of the *Korea Future Initiative*, a Human Rights Monitor for North Korea, read "She used to hide her bible in the ceiling... I became curious about the bible and I thought, 'What is this 'bible' that can lead to a whole family being arrested?'"

Like King Herod, the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, tolerates devotion to no person except himself.

There is a fragment of Kim Jong-Un in each of us. We want our own way. Do you know anyone who is strongly hostile to Jesus?

Chief Priests You may not have noticed them in the Bible reading but they are in the story too (in v.4).

The Jews were expecting a great leader, an anointed One from God. Herod calls on the 'chief priests and scribes'. They do know the Scriptures. The very Scriptures we too can read when we open our Bibles! Herod consulted them.

Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The Magi were directed to Bethlehem.

It is striking that the religious leaders seem to have no real interest in this enquiry beyond the fact that they were rightly consulted. Their role was simply consultants. Matthew tells of (as yet) no personal interest in the foreigners from the East.

As long as they can maintain temple services, the king's enquiry about the promised *messiah*, the 'leader from Bethlehem' is a matter of indifference.

There are still countless people for whom the birth of Jesus means nothing. Preoccupied with their own busy lives they are indifferent to the birth of a Saviour. The Jesus of Christmas means nothing the rest of the year.

Magi The Psalm 72 presents us with the ideal king.

This king delivers the needy when they call out, has pity on the weak and poor, saves the helpless from the greedy, the oppressive and the violent.

The needy, the poor and the oppressed are his priority. The very people Jesus was to celebrate in the Beatitudes. His kingdom will endure forever and the glory of such a King will cover the earth.

This is a vision of a king to whom the kings of the earth come bearing gifts (v.10). He is doing what they know *they* ought to be doing.

Solomon was visited by the Queen of Sheba, who reported concerning the splendour, that the half hadn't been told her, but none of Israel's kings were like this. Yet this psalm comes in at the beginning of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew we see it in the prostration of the Magi and the offering of their gifts. This 'king of the Jews' holds our attention.

Consider *The Journey of the Magi* by TS Eliot. At the end of his poem Eliot imagines the Magi reflecting on their trip. Eliot envisages the Magi being changed by their journey to 'the King of the Jews'. They had 'worshipped Him'.

The Magi are 'no longer at ease' in their own country and dominion. Their own people now feel 'alien', in possession 'different gods'. The Magi are less at ease in this world. Journeying to Jesus has changed them.

The birth we celebrate at Christmas presents us with one who will rule the world. At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus gives to a tiny group of disciples the commission to change the world. He claims "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given unto me".

We look for joy and comfort in the message of Christmas, but there is another dimension. When we become aware of the clash between the world new born with Immanuel on Christmas Day, and the old world we should feel growing unease. "In the old world that new birth is, and always will be, a scandal and an offence."

You and Me For us to encounter Jesus we had no great journey.

Some of us have known about Jesus all our lives, We may have known the Bible stories and even find them a bit [too] familiar? If He is our king, do we listen for his voice?

We know why He came and what it cost, but can we see He is renewing all things?

Have we come to Him?

Have we knelt before Him and yielded our loyalty and our love? Are our gifts offered in His service?

Do we seek to live the new life of His Kingdom?

Image: Celestial Conjunction, Yuri Beletsky
European Southern Observatory,
Paranal, Atacama Desert, Chile