



Breaking Open the Word

Sunday
5th January, 2025

Orient Tar



Prepared by

Dennis Webster



St Peter's by the Lake
Paynesville, Victoria Australia
Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 60.1-6

Psalms 72.10-15

Ephesians 3.1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

Introduction

Reflection

Discussion Questions

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

Something a bit different today. Down in the antipodes, and in particularly the southern states (not to be confused with “Deep South” we are emerged in heatwave conditions. It is also that odd fortnight after the Incarnation where the northern hemisphere feels it is too cold to do anything, and whilst we, the barbecue and beach culture may head to share our waters with the great leviathans of the deep, being careful not to become lunch.

So, closest Sunday to the Epiphany, I tend to run a ‘Trivia’ or ‘Quiz’ to see, as a popular television programme asks, “Have you been paying attention?”

Where’re you be in this wonderful and divine creation, may the Christ-child continue to be manifest in you and all you do.

Formal Introduction:

In his reflection, Dennis reflects on the story of the magi as they journey to meet the Christ child, highlighting the significance of their gifts and humble worship. He emphasises that while tradition often portrays the magi

as three kings, the biblical account does not specify their names or numbers, focusing instead on their role as wise men or astrologers who followed the star to find Jesus.

Dennis invites the congregation to look beyond the familiar narrative, recognising the theological messages behind the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and contrasting the magi's search for truth with Herod's fear-driven reaction to their arrival.

Dennis encourages listeners to shed preconceived notions influenced by tradition and approach the Scriptures with fresh eyes. He points out that the magi's journey invites all believers to listen for God's guidance and respond with faith, even amid uncertainty.

Through their example, the sermon inspires the congregation to seek the light of Christ and to embrace the gifts within themselves, ultimately celebrating the deep and profound message of the magi's experience in the context of the Epiphany season.

Prayer

- You can reflect on how the sermon's central message resonates with your current life challenges and seek God's guidance.
- Think about specific ways you can embody the teachings from the sermon this week in your interactions with others.
- You can pray for strength to overcome obstacles preventing you from applying the sermon's lessons daily.
- Consider a situation where you can demonstrate forgiveness and ask for God's help.

God,
who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-
begotten Son to the Gentiles:
Mercifully grant, that we,
which know thee now by faith,
may after this life have the fruition
of thy glorious Godhead:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,
your gift of life so that we, made in your image
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

As we approach the Epiphany season, we reflect on the magi, their thoughtful gifts, and their remarkable journey to meet the Christ child. Many of us cherish the story told in Matthew 2:1–12, filled with wisdom, divine guidance, and unexpected expressions of worship. However, in our excitement to appreciate its beauty, we might have let some layers of myth, legend, and tradition from long ago hide this sacred text's simple yet profound message.

Let's take a moment to explore Matthew's story anew. The wise men journey from the East in search of "the child who has been born king of the Jews," following the twinkling star that guides them. With hearts full of wonder, they bring precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, paying their respects to the child in a cozy Bethlehem home. After their visit, they receive a gentle warning in a dream not to return to Herod, so they set off for their homeland by another route.

Were There Three Kings?

Tradition often imagines the magi as three kings, and we joyfully sing carols that name them and even give them gifts: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. However, the Book of Matthew doesn't name the magi or specify how many there were. The concept of "three kings" likely comes from the three meaningful gifts

mentioned—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—each with rich significance.

These remarkable travellers were probably not kings but wise men or astrologers who were skilled in interpreting the divine messages written in the movements of the stars. Their incredible journey fulfilled the ancient prophecy from Numbers 24:17: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." Interestingly, they were Gentiles, outsiders who found their way towards the beautiful light of God's revelation.

The Gifts

The gifts—gold symbolising kingship, frankincense representing divinity, and myrrh associated with suffering and burial—hold significant theological meaning. Yet, it's important to note that Matthew emphasises the act of homage rather than the symbolic interpretations of the gifts. The magi's worship starkly contrasts Herod's paranoia, highlighting that God's kingdom is unveiled to the humble and those in search rather than the powerful and privileged.

A Timeline of Events

Matthew's story invites us to listen closely, particularly to the unfolding titles and events. When the magi arrive in Jerusalem, they eagerly ask,

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" This beautifully suggests that Jesus was born even before the star first shone. Later, Herod's heartbreaking order to slaughter children two years old and younger hints that some time—maybe even up to two years—has passed since Jesus's birth.

Furthermore, Matthew tells us that the magi find Jesus in a "house" in Bethlehem, not a stable. This aligns with the idea that Joseph and Mary had settled in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth and lived there when the magi arrived. It's worth noting that there were two Bethlehems in ancient Israel—one in Judea, near Jerusalem, and another in Galilee. However, the prophecies and the context of the story point to Bethlehem of Judea as the place of fulfilment.

The Magi and Herod

It's fascinating to see what the magi chose not to do: they didn't ask Herod for directions. Instead, their arrival in Jerusalem caused quite a stir, prompting Herod to summon them and inquire about the child. These wise men were guided by the star—a divine beacon—rather than seeking guidance from earthly kings or their courts. This beautifully subtle detail reveals that the true King of the Jews is not found in the grand palaces of power but in Bethlehem's humble, welcoming setting.

Listening with Care

The story of the magi invites us to open our hearts to the Scriptures, gently putting aside our modern assumptions and the traditions that

influenced the Enlightenment and medieval Christianity. Let's approach the text humbly, aiming to understand it as Matthew's first readers did, allowing the wisdom within to resonate with our lives.

The magi's journey isn't just a tale from long ago; it's a warm invitation for all of us! They listened carefully to God's signs and answered with faith, even when their way wasn't clear. Let's take a page from their book and pay close attention to the Scriptures, God's voice, and those gentle nudges from the Spirit in our lives. As we practice this, may we, like the magi, be drawn to the shining light of Christ, excited to share the wonderful gifts we each have within us.

The Epiphany Quiz

1. Who did the magi ask?
2. Who did Herod ask?
3. Why is Matthew so explicit regarding where the Christ was to be born?
4. In what manner did the magi respond when they saw the star?
5. Which prophet prophesied Bethlehem in Judea?
6. Where was the child Jesus?
7. What were the names of the Magi?
8. What was the name of the road the magi took out of Bethlehem?
9. Does it all matter?

Incentivisation

Humph: And prizes mean points. What do prizes mean?

Audience: (*hesitant*) Points!

Humph: ...Well, at least you're halfway intelligent.

Prize: the satisfaction of being right!

(BBC Radio 4: I'm sorry, I haven't a clue)

NRSV	Transliteration	Question	Discussion.
In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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.'	Now, Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of Herod the King, magi came from the east. They asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews for we have seen his star rising in the east, and we wish to pay homage."	Who did the magi ask?	Who did they ask? The text doesn't tell us, but certainly it was not Herod as we see in the next verse.
When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.	Having heard about this, Herod and his entire court were troubled, and so, all Jerusalem with him. Herod asked the scribes and chief priests after hearing about what the strangers were trying to find out.	Who did Herod ask?	Herod asked the scribes and chief priests after hearing about what the strangers were trying to find out.
⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ "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."'	They told him in Bethlehem in Judea, for thus it was written by the prophet. (Micah 5.2) And you, Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for under you go forth leading one who is to be the shepherd of my people Israel.	Why is Matthew so explicit regarding where the Christ was to be born?	There was more than one Bethlehem. The other was north of Nazareth. Beth Le Kem means, "House of Food" or "House of Meat." Not to be confused with "BETHEL" which is "House of God." (Also in modern Palestine. Shepherd links the story to House of David.
⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.'	Herod called the Magi in secret and then inquired when the star had first appeared. Having sent them to Jerusalem, saying to them "Search diligently for the child and when you have found it bring word back to me so I too may bend myself over and pay homage."		

NRSV	Transliteration	Questions	Discussion
⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.	Having heard the king, they went on their way. Behold, there again in the east they saw the star, and they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. So they followed it until it stopped over the place where the child was.	In what manner did the magi respond when they saw the star? Which prophet prophesied Bethlehem in Judea?	They rejoiced with exceedingly joy. Micah 5.2
¹¹ 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.	They entered the house and noticed the child with his mother Mary and having fallen down on their knees they paid the child homage. Having worshiped they opened their treasure-chests offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.	Where was the child Jesus? What were the names of the Magi?	In the HOUSE with Mary. No mention of Joseph, shepherds, donkeys, fleas, mangers or stables. We don't know. Miracle Play tradition <u>Caspar</u> : Often depicted as a young man and sometimes as representing the continent of Europe. <u>Melchior</u> : Traditionally portrayed as an older man, sometimes with a white beard, and representing Asia. <u>Balthazar</u> : Frequently depicted as a middle-aged man of African descent, symbolizing Africa.
¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.	Having been warned in a divine dream not to return to Herod, the magi took their leave to their own country, travelling on another road.	What was the name of the road the magi took out of Bethlehem? Does it all matter?	Another. Fulfilling prophecy is important. Conflating traditions and stories can come at a cost but is defensible. Stories, traditions, plays, music, memes even play a part in passing on the story. The most important thing is to never lose sight of the origin of the tradition or story and always to remember to check exactly what the Bible says, and why.

Conversation Starters with younger people.

You can discuss these topics with your kids to help further the conversation about what they may have learned on Sunday.

- Discuss the journey of the magi.
 - What did the magi follow to find Jesus? (Derived from their journey guided by the star)
- Please talk about the gifts they brought.
 - Why do you think the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were meaningful? (Based on their theological significance)
- Reflect on humility in worship.
 - How does the magi's worship contrast with Herod's actions? (Inspired by the message of humility versus paranoia)
- Explore the importance of guidance.
 - Why do you think the magi chose not to ask Herod for directions? (Rooted in their divine guidance)
- Connect the sermon to personal actions.
 - How can we listen to God's signs in our lives like the magi did? (Related to the call to openness and faith)

This five-day devotional, for 2025 renamed “Walking Gently on Sacred Land” will explore the sermon from this weekend in greater depth. We will explore the magi's journey, their gifts, and the lessons we can learn from their search for the Christ child.

Day 1 Matthew 2:11

The magi's journey begins with a simple yet powerful question: “Where is the child born king of the Jews?” This inquiry reflects their deep desire to honour and worship the one they believe to be the true king. As we contemplate their quest, we are invited to reflect on our spiritual journeys and how we seek God in our lives. The magi were guided by a star, a divine sign that led them to meet the Christ child. Their example calls us to examine what guides us in our pursuit of faith.

In our fast-paced world, it can be easy to overlook the gentle nudges of the Spirit. Just as the magi listened to God's signs, we, too, must remain attentive to the whispers of God's direction in our lives. The act of worship they displayed serves as a model for us to emulate—bringing our gifts and seeking God with a heartfelt spirit of humility and reverence.

- What guides you in your spiritual journey? Are you attentive to the signs God places before you?
- In what ways do you express your worship of God?
- How can you remain open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your daily life?
- Pray for clarity and openness to God's leading in your life.
- Ask God to reveal any distractions hindering your ability to hear His voice.

Day 2 Hebrews 11:1

Faith is often described as the assurance of things hoped for but not seen. The magi exemplify this faith as they embark on a long journey, trusting that the star will lead them to the Messiah. Their journey reminds us that faith often requires movement and action. It challenges us not to remain stagnant in our understanding but to pursue more profound revelations of who God is.

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the magi brought symbolise their honour and demonstrate their faith in recognising Jesus' kingship,



divinity, and, ultimately, the suffering He would endure. As we reflect on their gifts, we, too, are encouraged to consider what we offer to Christ and how we can deepen our relationship with Him through acts of faith.

- What does walking in faith look like for you today?
- How can you demonstrate your faith through tangible actions?
- In what ways are you called to offer your own 'gifts' to Christ?
- Pray for the courage to act on your faith, even when the path is unclear.
- Seek God's help in identifying your gifts and how to use them for His glory.

Day 3 Numbers 24:17

The prophecy that a star shall come out of Jacob captures the essence of God's revelation through the magi's journey. As we reflect on this prophecy, we realise that God's plans unfold over time, and His promises are always fulfilled, often in unexpected ways. The magi, Gentiles by nationality, signify that God's light is accessible to all, breaking down barriers and inviting everyone into His kingdom.

This invites us to consider who we might see as outsiders in our communities. God's invitation to worship and come to Him isn't limited to specific groups or individuals but extends to all willing to seek Him. We are called to reflect His love and inclusivity in our interactions, breaking down our barriers as we reach out to those who may feel distant from God's grace.

- Who do you perceive as outsiders in faith, and how can you reach out to them?
- What barriers might you need to dismantle in your own life to welcome others?
- How can you be more inclusive in your expressions of faith and fellowship?
- Pray for a heart that welcomes others as Christ welcomes us.
- Ask God to help you recognise His star, leading you to those who need His light.

Day 4 Matthew 2:10-11

The magi's joy upon seeing the star signifies their excitement at discovering God's presence. Their subsequent act of worship, laying down their gifts,

showcases their appropriate response to encountering the divine. This story encourages us to reflect on our posture when we find ourselves in God's presence. Are we filled with joy, and do we offer our best in worship?

Moreover, the contrast between the magi's humble worship and Herod's desire for power invites us to examine our motivations. True worship is not about recognition or status but about surrendering to the will of God and rejoicing in His grace. As we gather together in prayer, may we remember to seek the heart of God and celebrate that glorious gift: His presence among us.

- What makes you joyful in your worship of God?
- How do you ensure that your worship remains authentic and focused on Him?
- Are there ways you seek power or recognition that distract you from true worship?
- Pray for a heart of genuine worship, free from distractions and pride.
- Ask God to reveal the joy of His presence in your life daily.

Day 5 Luke 2:10-14

The proclamation of good news to the shepherds powerfully reminds us that the message of Christ's birth is meant for everyone. Just as the angels announced peace and goodwill to the shepherds, we are called to share this message with those around us. The magi's journey in seeking and finding Jesus inspires us to act as messengers of hope in our communities.

As we conclude this devotional, let us consider how we can continue to carry the light of Christ into the world. Having been warned in a dream, the magi took a different route home, teaching us that encountering Christ transforms our paths. Our encounters with Him should lead us to new directions, reflecting His love and grace wherever we go.



End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)
 The Gospel of Matthew

The Worship Cloud: articles by N.T. Wright and Jane Williams

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>



Brabarlung Totem
This is produced on
Gunaikurnai Land, and our
respects are paid to the First
Nations people everywhere.

Prepared by Rev'd Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville, Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

Acknowledgement of use appreciated

Subscription to "www.breaking-open-the-word.org" is available.
Published every weekend, usually on Saturday evening, AEST.

Biblical Quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version - Anglicised, which is © 1990 the National Churches of Christ, USA.

Study notes are prepared in conjunction and by subscription of www.church.tech, an AI open source for pastors. Content is modified for local use.

Images are either from public domain, theworshipcloud.org, original work or Adobe AI generated.

tastigr.info
is registered to D. M Webster
and all rights are
reserved. © 2025

www.breaking-open-the-word.org
Email: dennis-at-stpetersbythelakeanglicanchurch.org