**Sunday 3rd January 2021 - Morning Worship with Communion**

**Welcome and opening words**

Good morning, and welcome to worship this first Sunday of the New Year. My name is Ken Greer, and I am a member of the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership. This morning as part of our service, we will be celebrating Communion, so if you wish to get something to drink and some bread, please do so before that point in the service.

The wise men asked “where is the baby born to be King of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”

Let us be like the wise men and come to worship our Saviour as well

**The first hymn this morning is “As with gladness, men of old did the guiding star behold.”. Follow the video or join in with the hymns as you wish.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1.. As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold,  as with joy they hailed its light,  leading onward, beaming bright;  so, most gracious Lord, may we  evermore be led to thee. | 2.. As with joyful steps they sped,  Saviour, to thy lowly bed,  there to bend the knee before  thee whom heaven and earth adore;  so may we with willing feet  ever seek thy mercy-seat. |
| 3.. As they offered gifts most rare  at thy cradle plain and bare;  so may we with holy joy,  pure, and free from sin's alloy,  all our costliest treasures bring,  Christ, to thee, our heavenly King. | 4.. Holy Jesus, every day  keep us in the narrow way;  and, when earthly things are past,  bring our ransomed souls at last  where they need no star to guide,  where no clouds thy glory hide. |
| 5.. In the heavenly country bright  need they no created light;  thou its light, its joy, its crown,  thou its sun which goes not down;  there for ever may we sing  alleluias to our King. | William Chatterton Dix  ©1986 Horrobin/Leavers  ccli 169737  Streaming License 595811 |

**Let us join in our prayers of Praise and confession. Let us pray**

O Lord, we are gathered together at the start of a new year. Probably none of us will regret the passing of 2020, and we all look forward more optimistically to the year ahead. It has not been an easy year, the pandemic totally changed our lives, but one thing was constant and that was the fact that every step of our journey you were with us, supporting and encouraging .

We praise you for your goodness to us, and we pray that we will be able in the year ahead to be better role models of all you stand for. We rejoice that you are the Light of the World, and that although our world has become a very dark and threatening place, nothing can extinguish your light, it shines constantly for us, showing us the way to go, revealing to us the hidden dangers in our path ahead, and leading us to safety if we keep focussed on you.

Fill us with your light, so that we can shine out for others, and help to bring others to a knowledge and understanding of you

We talk of bringing others to you, but so often we fail miserably in that challenge. We know what we should do, but so often we let the opportunity pass us by.

We too should be searching for the one born in Bethlehem, but so often we get distracted by the attractions of the world. The Magi were seeking for something unknown, we have the Bible and past generations of Christians to tell what exactly we are seeking. Give us the desire in 2021 to actively find Jesus in our lives.

The Magi struggled in their search for Jesus, but they persevered. They knew they had to find whatever the star was leading them to discover. Forgive us for showing such weak efforts in our search, and our reluctance to actively share in the Good News that we are privileged to know, that Jesus came to save us from our sins and help us to properly know God.

Let us determine to make 2021 a totally different year to the last one, let us pray that our church both locally and across the world, will blossom and grow, and that we all will play a full and committed role in that growth.

And now let us bring these prayers together, using the words that Jesus taught his disciples and say-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory

For ever and ever

Amen

**Let us share in another hymn, as we ask God to lead us forward into the coming year, “Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart”**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1.. Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;  naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.  Thou my best thought, by day or by night,  waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light. | 2.. Be Thou my wisdom, Thou my true Word;  I ever with Thee, Thou with me, Lord;  Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;  Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one. |
| 3.. Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for the fight,  be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight.  Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower.  Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power. | 4.. Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,  Thou mine inheritance, now and always:  Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,  High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art. |
| 5.. High King of heaven, after victory won,  may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!  Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  still be my vision, O ruler of all. | From *The Poem Book of the Gael* selected and edited by Eleanor Hull  ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811 |

**We will now have two readings, first from the Gospel according to Matthew 2 v.1-12**

**The Magi visit the Messiah**

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:

6‘“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
    are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
    who will shepherd my people Israel.”’

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.’

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

**The second is a poem “the Journey of the Magi” by T.S. Eliot**

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.”  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, [refractory](https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161047#eid26153585),  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

**Let us now share in the carol “We three kings of Orient are”**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1.. We three kings of Orient are,  bearing gifts we travel afar;  field and fountain moor and mountain,  following yonder star: | 2.. Born a King on Bethlehem plain,  gold I bring to crown Him again;  King forever, ceasing never,  over us all to reign. |
| 3.. Frankincense for Jesus have I,  God on earth yet Priest on high;;  prayer and praising, all men raising,  worship is earth's reply: | 4.. Myrrh is mine: its bitter perfume,  tells of his death, and Calvary's gloom  sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  sealed in the stone-cold tomb. |
| 5.. Glorious now, behold Him arise,  King, and God and sacrifice!  Heaven sings out, "Alleluia!"  "Amen" the earth replies. | Chorus.. *O star of wonder, star of night,*  *star with royal beauty bright;*  *westward leading, still proceeding,*  *guide us to the perfect light.* |
| John H Hopkins (1820-91) altered © 1986 Horrobin/Leavers ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811 | |

**Sermon:**

On my table this morning I have one of our most familiar scenes, a Nativity, in my case a knitted one! We have all probably participated in a Nativity at some time, all the characters allocated out amongst the children: all the girls hoping to be Mary or Angel Gabriel, the boys hoping for Joseph or a shepherd, or even a King! But what are these kings doing here, they don’t belong in the stable scene, they arrived on the scene much later. Mary and Joseph would appear to still be in Bethlehem but are now in a house when the Magi arrive to worship their new born son.

These visitors from the East are shrouded in mystery we don’t know how many there were of them; some traditions have the figure as high as twelve. We normally have assumed three, because of the three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, and have even in legend attributed names to them, Melchior, Balthazar and Caspar. All we know from the Bible is that they were men who studied the stars, and their coming was prophesied in Isaiah –

“Great caravans of camels will come from Midian and Ephah. They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense. People will tell the good news of what the Lord has done.” (60 v.6)

What we do know is that they followed a star, found the baby, and gave him gifts. Gold the symbol of Kingship, Frankincense the symbol of priesthood and prayer, and Myrrh the symbol of death. A very strange mixture to bring to a new baby, but at least they brought him something. What are we bringing to the new born King this Epiphany?

Gold is a symbol of great wealth. This was not something that Jesus had in the traditional sense, but it was something Jesus never sought; all he wanted was to obey his Father’s wishes. What do we value that we would give up for Jesus? A few years ago, I read of a high-flying banker in the City, who gave it all up to become an Anglican priest. My story loses a little bit of its impact when I say that his name is Justin Welby, and he now is the Archbishop of Canterbury! But that wasn’t in his thoughts when he decided to give his live to Christ. For him, the most important thing was Christ. Do we have things in our lives, to which Jesus has to take second place? Everyone’s list will be different, it maty be your family, your career, the golf club, Manchester United, it can be anything, but it can be stopping you putting Jesus at the forefront of your mind.

The second gift was Frankincense. Frankincense is an incense obtained from the Boswellia tree. In Exodus God told Moses to use it some other spices to make it into a holy incense which was used to anoint Aaron, the brother of Moses, and it was to be kept as a holy mixture, not to be used for any other purpose. It also symbolised prayer. In recent weeks, we have been thinking deeply about prayer and the important role it plays, or should play in our lives. 2020 has been a pretty dreadful year, but is our first response to take it to God in prayer? And more importantly, if we do take something to God in prayer, do we expect him to respond, or do we just pour our prayer out on automatic pilot, never really believing that we will get an answer? We have to listen for the still small voice, that can change our lives.

The third gift was Myrrh, the symbol of death. It seems a very strange choice of gift for a baby, but it echoes the words of one of the Magi in Eliot’s poem-

“Were we led all this way for Birth or death

There was a Birth certainly, we had evidence and no doubt.

I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different; this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.”

He sees that this child is going to change the world, and overthrow all the old religions, which the Magi represent.

Death was something that foreshadowed Jesus throughout his life. When the Magi first go to Herod, they asked where the King of the Jews would be born, and when Jesus was crucified, that was the notice that Pilate had nailed above his head. The early church also lived with the constant threat of death hanging over them, and this is still the case foe many of our brothers and sisters in Christ even today. We, in this country, are under no physical threat for our beliefs, but almost worse, we are almost ignored; the Church has become almost irrelevant for so many people today. People go to Church in diminishing numbers, and we must fear what the impact of Covid will be, as people get out of the habit of going to church every Sunday. The need is going to be greater than ever before, for we, the modern disciples, to be active in spreading the good news that we are privileged to know, that God so loved the world that he gave his only son to die, so that the world might be saved.

Even though Jesus was only a baby, Herod still felt extremely threatened by him. He was a man of incredible cruelty. He murdered his mother and his sons, for he feared they might be a threat to him, as Augustus said, “It was safer to be Herod’s pig than his son”. He wasn’t going to brook any challenge to his throne, and so came the Slaughter of the Innocents, when he ordered the death of all young boys in Bethlehem.

Jesus managed to escape, because God spoke to the Magi in a dream, not to go back to Herod, and even though they were not Jews, like Abraham they obeyed what God told them to do. Would we be so open to the voice of God today? As we enter 2021, let us resolve to commit ourselves anew to God, to be ready to hear his call and to respond to that call.

**Let us come together in our Prayers of Intercession, let us pray.**

Lord, we pray for our world. We entered 2020 with our usual enthusiasm, with great hopes of how it would develop, but our hopes were cruelly dashed by the dreadful pandemic that struck. We grieve with all those who lost loved ones, and give thanks for all those who have worked tirelessly to try and contain the virus and protect us. We give thanks for the medical staff who have worked so hard across the world, sometimes against what must have seemed insurmountable odds. We give thanks for the scientists who, with your help, have discovered a vaccine, that will hopefully protect us in the future. We also rejoice that throughout this testing time, we have the reassurance that you are with us on every step of our journey.

We pray for our country. We pray for the politicians faced with the challenging task of trying to steer us through the difficult choices that lie ahead of us. We face an unsettled future as we move into Brexit, and we pray that you will be with us on our new journey. We give thanks for the Queen, who has given us a sense of stability in these stormy times. We pray for all, who have lost their jobs or seen future prospects diminish, be with them, keep their hopes up, and support them as they move forward.

We pray for Rochdale. Like the rest of the North-west, we have had a testing time through 2020. We pray that we may move forward with hope and confidence into the New Year. We pray for our young people at school or university, as they try to get back to a degree of normality.

We pray for our Church. We give thanks for the way that our ministerial team of Richard, Daniel and Kate, with the support of the Elders, have led us in these dark days. We give thanks for the return of fellowship and being able to see old friends again. We ask for a rekindling of our missional flame, as we get an opportunity to spread the Good News again. Help us to be up to the task to which we are called.

Finally, we pray for ourselves. We pray for any who are ill, and particularly think of their families, trying to maintain a feeling of optimism, which they may well not be feeling. Make 2021 a memorable year for each of us, in which our faith grows, and we come to know Christ more deeply. We ask all these things in the name of Christ

Amen

**Let us now share in our next hymn, “And can it be”, as we approach the Communion table**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1.. And can it be that I should gain  an interest in the Saviour's blood?  Died He for me, who caused His pain?  For me, who Him to death pursued?  Amazing love! How can it be  that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? | 2.. 'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies;  who can explore His strange design?  In vain the first-born seraph tries  to sound the depths of love divine.  'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  let angel minds inquire no more. |
| 3.. He left His Father's throne above -  so free, so infinite His grace -  emptied Himself of all but love,  and bled for Adam's helpless race.  'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  for, O my God, it found out me! | 4.. Long my imprisoned Spirit lay  fast bound in sin and nature's night;  Thine eye diffused a quickening ray -  I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  my chains fell off, my heart was free;  I rose, went forth and followed Thee. |
| 5.. No condemnation now I dread;  Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!  Alive in Him, my living Head,  and clothed in righteousness divine,  bold I approach the eternal throne,  and claim the crown, through Christ, my own. | Charles Wesley  ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811 |

**Communion**

Jesus was often a guest. He shared many meals with friends, and they long remembered his words at the table. Jesus ate and drank with all sorts of people and showed everyone the love of God. Wherever people met together Jesus was glad to be welcomed and to be fed. Today, we are the guests of Jesus. He welcomes us, whoever we are and whatever we bring, and he will feed us at his table. Old or young, rich or poor, joyful or in sorrow, Jesus invites us to share bread and wine with him, and to remember the story of his life and death, and to celebrate his presence with us today. On the night before he died, Jesus shared a meal with twelve of his friends in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. The Gospel writer tells us what happened that night.

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it ,gave it to them and said “take ,eat, this my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I tell you, I will never again drink the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God”

We are the friends and disciples of Jesus today. He invites us to break bread together to remember him and to pray that God’s Kingdom will come.

We bring this bread and this wine to the table of Jesus. With them we bring ourselves, all that we are and all that we own. May the ordinary become holy, and heaven be opened to the people of earth. May God be blessed forever.

And now let us give thanks before sharing the bread and wine.

We praise you that we are sharing today around the table of Jesus. We have heard the good news of your love; the cross is the sign of your arms stretched out in love for us and the empty tomb declares your love stronger than death.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine, and upon your people, that Christ may be with us, and we may be ready to live for you and to do what you ask of us, today, and every day to come.

Let us now share the elements

Eat this bread. It is the bread of life

Drink this wine. It is the cup of blessing

Loving God, you have fed us generously at this table, as we have remembered Jesus and rejoiced that he is with us today. We are ready now to follow him and to be your people in the world. May your Holy Spirit show us the way, make us holy and fill us with love.

**Now let us share our final hymn “Lord for the years”**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1.. Lord, for the years, Your love has kept and guided,  urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,  sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:  Lord for the years, we bring our thanks today. | 2.. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,  speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,  teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:  Lord of the word, receive Your people's praise. |
| 3.. Lord, for our land in this our generation,  spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:  for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,  Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer. | 4.. Lord, for our world where men disown and doubt You,  loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,  hungry and helpless, lost indeed without You:  Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign. |
| 5.. Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us-  self on the cross, and Christ upon the throne,  past put behind us, for the future take us:  Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone. | Timothy Dudley-Smith  © 1969 by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL  60188.  ccli 169737 Streaming licence 595811 |

**Benediction**

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, rest and abide with each and every one of us this day and for evermore. Amen.