

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Feast of the Epiphany

readings: Isaiah 60 1-6; Ephesians 3 1-12; Matthew 2 1-12.

4 January 2026

“They think it’s all over. Well it is now!” Iconic words from football commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme as the crowd prematurely invaded the pitch when England won the 1966 World Cup with two late goals scored in extra time.

The same could possibly be said today about Christmas: “they think it’s all over”. The Feast of the Epiphany that we celebrate today signifies the end of the 12 days of Christmas (technically Epiphany is actually on the 6th January if you want to be pedantic). In some traditions it’s the day by which your Christmas decorations should be taken down, although in other traditions they stay up legitimately until Candlemas.

But there is a significant difference between the traditions of the secular Christmas and the spiritual Christmas. The commercial Christmas began in November, straight after Halloween, or even before, as I certainly saw mince pies for sale in my local Tesco’s during October half-term. And the community Christmas also began in late November with the traditional rash of Christmas lights in suburban gardens and city windows getting earlier and earlier every year.

The timings of the commercial Christmas and the Christian Christmas have long got out of phase, with the former starting before the Church has even reached Advent, and it is a brave Christian who tries to stand against the tide: although I once interviewed a Roman Catholic primary school headteacher whose new chair of governors, a parish priest, decreed that liturgically Advent ran until Christmas Eve, so there should be no nativity plays, no school carol services or decorations until then... and so discovered what King Canute must have felt like.

And the commercial Christmas is decreed to be all over when the January Sales begin, usually on Boxing Day, but now through the wonders of internet shopping, sometimes on Christmas Day itself. And it certainly will seem over for schoolchildren and their teachers who go back to school tomorrow, and there will be few in paid employment who will not also be back at work by then. “They think it’s all over. Well it is now”... and so on to the next commercial opportunity, Valentine’s Day followed by Easter. And I kid you not that my wife spotted a pack of “Free From” Hot Cross Buns in Sainsbury’s last week: certainly ‘free from’ any adherence to the liturgical calendar.

Even the Christian Christmas tends to telescope the birth, the shepherds, and the kings into one great amorphous narrative to be enacted at Christmas services and nativity plays. But to revert to the footballing analogy I began with, it’s not all over, this is ‘a game of 2 halves’: Christmas *and* Epiphany. So today we enter the ‘extra time’ of Epiphany with the arrival of the so-called Wise Men, the Three Kings, the Magi.

‘Learnèd’ certainly, but hardly ‘wise’? For a start they actually arrived late: well into the second half, and not just slightly late but 12 days late, 12 days after the birth (hence our tradition of Twelfth Night). In his book *“Helena”*, a historical novel about the saintly mother of the 4th century Emperor Constantine, the author Evelyn Waugh contrasts the shepherds who were free to run straight to the manger, with the magi who got mixed up in politics and in anxiety about what gifts to bring, and were late. Helena addresses her thoughts to them as “the patron saints of all latecomers”:

“How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by such liveries, laden with what preposterous gifts. You came at last to the final stage of your pilgrimage and the great star stood still above you. What did you do? You stopped to call on King Herod!”¹

In their naivety, the ‘wise men’ seemed not to have anticipated any difficulty in asking of this self-centred, egotistical yet secretly vulnerable individual where a rival king might have recently been born: (it’s a bit like stopping off at the White House to enquire of Donald Trump where the next Democratic President was going to come from!). Yet they came, late but at last, to the stable and were not turned away: they too found room before the manger.

And these wise men brought gifts: yes apparently preposterous gifts yet highly symbolic ones: Gold a gift for a king, Frankincense a gift for a priest, Myrrh a gift for the dying and for a healer. The wise men’s gifts were not needed but they were accepted for what they were, and put carefully by, for they were brought with love. In that new order of charity that had just come to life, there was room for them too.

The wise men came with the *prospect* of hope in a new and different future. They came with a *purpose*: they did not stumble on the birth of the Messiah by chance but by design. They came *prepared* with symbolic gifts ready to present (no matter how impractical in the circumstances) with a symbolism that has resonated down the ages and still does for us today. But above all they came as *people*, as representatives of a world beyond the Jewish nation, as Gentiles, as foreigners, as outsiders, as symbols of the divine plan for all God’s people wherever they are set, paving the way for the commandment of the Risen Christ to make disciples of all the nations.

All this is well known and well-rehearsed in history, but perhaps subject to some review. We do not really know *why* they came: we are not given any clues about their precise motivation other than their implied curiosity as astrologers in following an unusual star wherever it led.

We actually do not know for certain that there were only three of them: we simply deduce that from the number of gifts that were brought. In fact there is a traditional folk story that suggests there were actually four wise men, the fourth bearing a casket of jewels, but horrified by the poor and needy he encountered on his journey, he was held back by pity, and by seeking to use that wealth to alleviate the suffering he saw.

We can’t even be 100% sure that they were wise men: although the prevailing societal and cultural dynamic would certainly have mandated that this should be so. When I first started preaching, many years ago, I was told that the pulpit is no place for humour and certainly not the place to risk offending significant proportions of a congregation by preaching on political or social issues where there might be strong differences of opinion! I have regularly disregarded that advice, and intend to do so again by citing the Christmas cartoon that I saw some years ago which speculated about what would have happened if instead of the wise men, there had been *wise women*? The cartoon suggested that: 1. They would have asked for directions; 2. They would not have arrived late; 3. They would have helped to deliver the baby; 4. They would have brought ‘practical’ gifts; and 5. They would have made a casserole!

But buried in this humour there is a serious message. Epiphany, the revelation of Christ to the wider world beyond the Jews, is a *turning point*, a change in the story’s direction. This then is the moment for us to turn: to turn and look for wisdom wherever it is to be found, be it amongst the wise men or even the wise women of our generation who have broken free of prevailing stereotypes. This is the moment to look for wisdom among the young of the generations that follow us, who will have to clean up the mess we have left behind.

This is the moment for us to look to the poor, the refugees, the downtrodden and the dispossessed, whose wisdom drawn from bitter experience can powerfully speak truth to power both now and into the future.

The Magi brought gifts: symbolic gifts of far-sighted wisdom. Their gifts might have been set aside as being of little immediate practical use to a homeless family shortly destined to flee as refugees, but their wisdom endures. And above all, one gift remains.

Alan Horner, in his poem “Twelfth Night”², sums it all up for us:

*Now is the ebbing, now:
the cards collapse;
the bald tree shorn of baubles;
the lights laid low in their unbright box;
candles are cold, figures
no longer in focus return to rest:
Only the gifts remain.*

*The angels are ‘gone away’;
the shepherds ‘returned’;
the Magi ‘departed another way’;
and Joseph with Mary fled.
She must not mind, but mind
her son, pondering these things.
Only this gift remains.*

“Only this gift remains”

The gift of God,
The gift of His Son,
Emmanuel, God with us.

Thanks be to God.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain Emeritus**

1. Evelyn Waugh (1950) *Helena*, Chicago: Loyola Press, p.208

2. Alan Horner (2015) *A Picture with the Paint Still Wet: Selected Poems*, Milton Keynes: Revaph Publications, p.40