

Isaiah 60.1-6

Matthew 2.1-12

4th January 2026 Epiphany

Journeys to Faith

Just a month before Christmas last year I had the privilege of sharing a day with Ruth, church member here at AFC and Head of Multi-Faith Chaplaincy, at Heathrow Airport.

Being the end of November, it was an ordinary day with 210,000 passengers flying from, and arriving at, the airport. By Christmas, Ruth told me, that daily total would rise to 250,000 journeys undertaken every day.

And it was a strange experience to walk around Terminal 5, for example, without a suitcase. As I accompanied Ruth I saw, firsthand, just how many people came up to her with questions and observed the super way she encouraged passengers, especially those who were obviously nervous, about their onward journeys. Chaplaincy offers that touch of humanity in processes that sometimes make us feel a little too much like a commodity or number.

Yet, many of us make difficult and demanding journeys at the year's end and beginning. We do it because we are drawn to the people we love and putting an hour or two on the journey seems worth it when we reach their home, the door opens and we are greeted with a broad smile of welcome.

In his poem, *Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot speaks of the rough and arduous journey of the Wise Men to Bethlehem. A long trek with an ambiguous destination, yet a journey undertaken with some compulsion.

Here's how one of them describes it:

*'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed,
refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted leaving
The summer palaces on slopes, the
terraces,*

And the silken girls bringing sherbet.'

We have gotten used to these Kings bearing their extravagant and poignant gifts, that perhaps we fail to be shocked anymore by their inclusion into a very Jewish story.

Maybe, in our expectation of their arrival every Epiphany, perhaps we fail to marvel at their audacious juxtaposition alongside the shepherds, so wonderfully enacted last month as both crowns and tea towels were donned at the nativity play.

So, this morning, just a couple of days away from Epiphany 2026, let's try to suspend our over familiarity with the Magi for a moment and appreciate once more their unusual part in the narrative of the Incarnation.

I suspect the first point worth noting about them is simply the contrast they make with those shepherds.

On the social scale these groups, magi and shepherds, occupied opposite ends. Shepherds were foundational functionaries to Israel's economy yet, and I always find this sadly ironic, they were excluded from temple worship because their work made their hands dirty and so they were deemed ceremonially unclean. That surely makes Christ's description of himself as the 'Good Shepherd' wonderfully empathetic to faithful keepers of flocks on the hillsides of just about every Jewish village.

But the Wise Men – well they were in a league all their own. We know it's pretty difficult to define the word Magi – almost certainly this group of people were from Persia which is modern day Iran. They were probably respected academics, and philosophers. We like to think of them as thoughtful people who pondered life and its meaning. And part of being educated in those far off days is that you became rather good at stargazing. The patterns in the night sky gave pointers about the universe.

My grandfather tried to encourage me into astronomy. Whenever I stayed with my grandparents, he lent me his binoculars and gave me books on the stars so I could stand for what seemed like hours in their garden looking up into the night sky. I remember that feeling, perhaps for the first time, of sensing that we on earth are part of something so, so much bigger as I just glimpsed from my grandparent's back garden the vastness of space.

The folksy bit about them arriving on camels, the wise men that is, not my grandparents! is stitched together somewhat from the Isaiah passage we read this morning. Indeed, some scholars would say their whole inclusion in the story is something of a myth – that is to say it's part of the Midrash tradition of Jewish literature. That's a rabbinic way of interpreting a text like Isaiah and embroidering it with dialogue and stories as it's placed into a contemporary context. The purpose of Midrash isn't to be a news reporter but a storyteller conveying deep and significant truth.

And the truth behind the Magi myth – proclaimed by Matthew, who writes his gospel primarily for Jews, is that God's love, expressed towards us in Jesus Christ, is to be viewed as universal, that is, it's for all. It's for shepherds and kings, for Jews and Gentiles – for either end of the demographic spectrum and anyone else in between.

There is, it seems to me, a wonderfully refreshing and frank lack of nuance by Matthew as he makes this point. He just plunges straight in and shocks his synagogue going, torah expert readers with the story of these 'outsiders' – these Persian academics – being amongst the first to acknowledge the infant Christ as Messiah. Maybe it offended some, confused others, and it certainly made everyone sit up and listen.

God seems to habitually surprise us – he's bigger than our expectations, blows apart our prejudices and even has the impertinence to question our well thought out theology.

Now, the second comment I would make about this story we're pondering on the first Sunday of 2026 is just to acknowledge that God shines light in God's way – which is not necessarily in our way! That means eastern stargazers, probably – and here's the tricky bit – probably adherents to another faith tradition entirely, get the message of Jesus just as clearly as those orthodox shepherds who probably had certificates from Synagogue school hanging on their walls back home.

But these wise men were anything but orthodox in their beliefs.

However, being spiritual and being orthodox isn't always the same thing. Sometimes it's those who think outside the box who seem to understand God the most.

God's light shines where it will.

We all get surprises about the way God works.

Next week we are so looking forward to Duncan's baptism, and we hold him in our prayers as he prepares for it. In my first church I had the privilege of baptising many teenagers who had come to faith through the youth group. On asking them why they wanted Believer's Baptism almost none of them said it was as a result of the sermons I'd preached – what a surprise! - but because of the positive influence on their lives of friends, youth leaders or family.

God's light shines where it will – when it will. And on this occasion, it seemed to shine better through friendships, and family role modelling, than it did through my sermons!!

We in the church hold precious truths. This revealed truth – which is really the foundation of the reformed theology a church like ours professes – is something we hold dear and long to pass on to succeeding generations.

And yet... the story of the Magi reminds us to nurture respect for peoples of other faiths and none. That longing for the spiritual is clearly heard as our Muslim friends are called to prayer from a minaret. That longing for peace is clearly seen in the way you'd be welcomed with a meal at any Sikh Gurdwara. That longing to be in touch with something other than the material in life is clearly experienced in the meditation of a Buddhist practitioner.

The starting place for inter-faith dialogue is that of respect for neighbour – and the belief that God's light shines where it wills – even upon wise men who came to Christ because, as well as reading the scriptures they also studied the stars.

We love watching the BBC series *Race Across the World* as contestant embarked on a massive journey by land for the cost of the ticket if it had been undertaken by air. In series two we became really impressed by the winners, Emon and Jamiul, who didn't leave their Islamic faith at home, but sought out times to pray at local mosques and, at the end, gave away half of their prize money, to help some of the street children they had encountered on route. At the review gathering in the final

episode it was heartwarming to hear their fellow competitors describe them as the most generous duo of the entire group.

We rejoice wherever, and in whoever, we see God's love manifested.

And now a final thought for this first Sunday of a New Year – I hope we are inspired by the Magi's journey after truth.

They seem utterly drawn and determined.

Well, today we sing the last of our carols, which at this service have an epiphany theme. It's been a huge privilege to welcome folk into the Sanctuary for carol services, whether that was early December for the Community Connex concert or the thrill of a full church on Christmas Eve.

I recall a conversation I had with a young man at the door after such a service. He told me he'd been the year before and, smilingly said, *so I think that now makes me a regular!*

And he reflected on his first visit and how he kept his head down and slipped away afterwards, but then he looked me in the eye and said: *as I mingled anonymously in the congregation and as I sang those carols I felt I had met with truth.*

Wasn't that a great thing to say. *I felt I had met with truth.*

That's the testimony left by these determined visitors from the east – having opened themselves up to the possibility of truth they now pursued it with great tenacity.

2026 stretches out before us. What sort of faith journey could it be for you? Just a year to stand still or a year to move forward? A year to settle for the obvious or one to explore fresh ways of thinking, praying and being.

The story of Epiphany is that of following a star – following God's light wherever it leads us – into truth – and on the journey developing and growing our skills of discernment.

Maybe today you've come to church feeling the struggle of a New Year because the future seems like a dark and difficult place. Well maybe we can all be encouraged by the Magi – that God's light will pierce our darkness and bring us all hope and joy in unexpected places in 2026.

Follow the star, find the light and kneel at the foot of the crib knowing you have found love incarnate and the wisdom of the ages.

May that be your journey this New Year, in the name of God, who leads us all by the starlight of his love into tomorrow. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd January 2026