

# Hounslow Methodist Church



## Epiphany Service

### The Wise Men's Tale

4<sup>th</sup> January 2026

#### Call to Worship

**Leader 1:** Come, people of God, look up and look forward.

Come as the Wise Men came—seeking, journeying, discovering.

**All:** *We come, ready to follow Christ's light.*

#### Candle-Lighting (Christ's Light Revealed)

**Leader 2:**

We relight the candles of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Now we light the Epiphany candle, celebrating Christ revealed to the nations.

**All:** *Light of Christ, shine for all people.*

**Leader 2:** Lead us onward.

**All:** *We will follow your star, Lord Jesus.*

**Leader :** The Wise Men show us that Christ is for all people, all journeys, all seekers. Their tale is one of searching, giving, and revelation.

#### Object for Reflection – A Star

**Leader 1:** We look at this star—bright and steady.

Where is God leading us this year?

**All:** *We will follow your light, Lord Jesus.*

#### Prayer

**Leader 2:** Guiding God...

Give us eyes to see your light and courage to follow it.

Make our gifts worthy offerings before Christ.

When we are unsure of the way...

**All:** *Guide us, Lord Jesus.*

As we celebrate Epiphany. Today the Christmas story opens out to the world as we hear the Wise Men's Tale — a story of seekers who followed the light they were given and discovered Christ for themselves.

**Opening Hymn: See the star**

**Gathering Prayer**

God of guiding light, as we gather today, shine on our paths. Help us notice your presence, trust where you lead, and follow Christ with joy. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession**

God of grace, we confess that we do not always follow your light. We lose our way and miss the signs of your presence. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us again in the way of Christ.

**Assurance:** In Christ we are forgiven and set free. Thanks be to God.

Lord's prayer

**Hymn- In the bleak midwinter**

**Bible Reading – Matthew 2:1–12**

Introduction: We hear the story of travellers who followed a star, asked questions, and discovered Christ revealed to the world.

**Hymn We three kings**

**Sermon – The Wise Men's Tale: Following the Light**

Have you ever followed a light?

The image of the wise men that appears on so many Christmas cards is rather different from the account we find in the Bible. We are used to seeing three crowned kings kneeling before the infant Jesus, presenting their gifts. Yet the evangelist Matthew tells us none of this. He does not say they were three in number, nor that they were kings.

Matthew calls them *Magi*—the plural of *magoi* in Greek. These were not monarchs, nor simply “wise men” in the modern sense. They were most likely Zoroastrian priests: scholars trained in the interpretation of dreams and the study of the stars. They were known for astrology, the telling of fortunes, and the preparation of horoscopes, and they enjoyed access to the Persian court. Zoroastrianism itself is one of the world's oldest living religions and was the official religion of Persia before the rise of Islam.

Zoroastrians follow the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, who was believed to have been miraculously conceived by a virgin and to have begun his public ministry at the age of thirty, following victory over temptation. Zoroastrian tradition also spoke of further divinely appointed prophets who would be born of virgins as history unfolded—events that the priests believed could be discerned by reading the stars. Like the Jewish people, they were anticipating the arrival of a true saviour.

Matthew tells us that these Zoroastrian priests followed the star to Bethlehem not simply as a travel detail, but as a theological statement. Their journey affirms that Jesus fulfils not only the hopes and prophecies of Israel, but also the deepest longings of the Gentile world. These outsiders recognise Jesus' kingship and divinity. Crucially, they go to Bethlehem—not Rome—to seek the King of the Jews. For Matthew's audience, this mattered: Persia was a long-standing religious and political counterweight to Roman power. Jesus is presented as a king whose authority does not depend on empire.

The Magi were travellers who noticed a light that others ignored. They trusted what they were given, even when the journey was uncertain. At times they took wrong turns, yet they were willing to change direction. In the end, the star led them not to a palace, but to a child. There they knelt, worshipped, and offered their gifts.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were not ordinary presents. Gold symbolised kingship and divine authority. Frankincense represented wisdom and was used in worship, while myrrh was associated with healing and long life. Both frankincense and myrrh were costly substances, fit for royalty. When the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she brought spices, gold, and precious stones—gifts befitting a king. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is honoured in the same way.

Not everyone welcomes this light. King Herod is deeply troubled by the news the Magi bring. He feels threatened. Herod was not a Jew by birth, but an Idumean whose family had converted to Judaism, and he ruled with Roman approval rather than popular support. Though he knew the scriptures well enough to identify Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace, Herod did not meet the messianic hope himself. Already paranoid about rivals, he responded with violence, ordering the death of the children of Bethlehem.

The Magi, however, respond differently. Having seen the child, they return home by another road—changed by what they have encountered.

That is the heart of the Epiphany story: *look and see*. God gives light—not always for the whole journey, but always enough for the next step. As we begin a new year, the story invites us to notice God's light, to trust it, and to follow where it leads, even if it takes us along unfamiliar paths.

But Epiphany also reminds us that light must be noticed. There is little point in God giving us light for the next step if we sleep through the opportunity and never lift our eyes to see it.

As the song we will hear shortly puts it:

*Oh Bethlehem, what you have missed while you were sleeping  
For God became a man and stepped into your world today  
Oh Bethlehem, you will go down in history  
As a city with no room for its King.*

As we begin a new year maybe this the time for us all to be awake to the light that comes from Christ, incarnate and born among us.

Amen

### **Song – While you were sleeping, by Casting Crowns**

#### **Prayers of Intercession**

Response: Light of Christ, guide us.

For the world and its leaders...  
For those on difficult journeys...  
For seekers and those unsure of faith...  
For our community and ourselves...

Amen.

During advent we have been to the stable, met up with Joseph, who taught us to trust, even when we were not sure. We met up with the innkeeper and talked about making room. We spent time with Mary who taught us about saying 'yes' to God. The shepherds reminded us God speaks through the ordinary things of life. And of course on Christmas Day we celebrated the king who came to earth in all his vulnerability to guide us on our way. Today we are reminded that we need to be awake to all that God has in store for us, but also to remember that God gives us enough light to guide through the next stage.

These were our tales from the stable.

### **Hymn – O come all ye faithful**

#### **Blessing**

May the light that guided the Wise Men shine on your path. May Christ go before you, beside you, and behind you. And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you now and always. Amen.