

Sermon Sunday 5 January 2025

Happy New Year to you all!

As I thought about Epiphany, I wondered what the gifts of the Magi mean for us in 2025, in the world we live in. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to think about the gifts along with our goals for the New Year. Let's meet Karen and her situation.

Karen thought to herself, I am hardly a regular church go-er. Here I am, a 39-year-old with three young daughters living in a semi-rural community. 2024 had been a hard year and the journey not straightforward for her, her long-term relationship with the father of her children had come to an end. In the middle of the year her mother had died from cancer. Karen had been heavily involved in her care with the help of the hospice nurses. She thought to herself, the staff were wonderful and still kept in contact with her. Then just two months ago she was made redundant, in a job she had enjoyed for 15 years. Karen was grateful for the support of several close friends and the church community.

It was two weeks before Christmas and Karen thought to herself, this will be a slimmed down Christmas. Money was very short. She was preparing her daughters as well as she could. It was hard for a 10-, 8- and 6-year-old to understand that the gifts from Santa would be few. She thought though, that they understood the situation.

It was Tuesday and as usual she set off for the supermarket with a carefully formed list of the essential supplies. In the supermarket she met a member of the church community she hardly knew. Tanya suggested that she buy them both a coffee at the local café. Karen gratefully accepted this offer. They talked about the year that was almost at an end and the challenges both of them had faced. Both of them recognised though, the opportunities that God had provided in the midst of those challenges. Despite some dark times, the light shone through. They recognised the good in the people around them, both in the church and in the community. They left the café feeling grateful and positive. I will see you at church over Christmas Karen remarked to Tanya as they parted.

In the week leading to Christmas Karen was busy preparing the house and the children. The preparation was simple and thoughtful. A few days before Christmas a

group from the Church community stopped outside Karen's house to sing Christmas carols. She thought to herself, that was truly beautiful! I am so blessed!

Then just two days before Christmas another member of the local community, unexpectedly, dropped off a large box of goodies. Food, other groceries, gifts for the girls and a gift for Karen. The box even included an invitation to Christmas dinner for the family with a local family. She again thought, wow, that is tremendous! It would make such a difference to their Christmas celebration! There are a lot of kind people in the community! I will make a real effort to attend at least one of the Christmas services to give thanks. There is always light amid the dark times she also thought. God shines through it all.

And here we are at Epiphany. One definition of Epiphany means "*to show up, show on, show out.*" The baby Jesus has been born. The shepherds have visited. There is and continues to be, both excitement and a sense of being terrified. And the angel maintains the calm, "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will bring great joy for all the people... a Saviour has been born to you... (Luke 2: 10).

The excitement and the uncertainty continue. The scene is filled with terror and tension, there is also wonder and worship. The child Jesus is thought to be about two years old by now. The Magi are on their way to visit the Messiah, *guided by the star*. Feel their excitement as they arrive in Jerusalem from the east! The Magi "*show up*" and ask: "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." (Matthew 2: 2). They have a single focus: with worship on their mind. The star guided the Magi all the way to where child Jesus was. The star marked the spot, their ultimate destination. The Magi were overjoyed. They bowed down and worshipped the child Jesus. They opened their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – gifts fit for a King. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of death.

The Magi have captured the imagination of theologians, scholars, poets, musicians and artists for many centuries. And so have their gifts. The gifts have been interpreted

symbolically, theologically and artistically in ways that are rich and creative. The Magi were singly focused on following the signs on their journey to lay these expensive gifts at the feet of Jesus. Even to the point of disobeying King Herod.

We know that the journey was not straight forward. It had its challenges. King Herod heard about the journey. He was angry and not only him, but all of Jerusalem were also disturbed. Herod's anger stands in stark contrast to the awe and curiosity of the Magi. Herod wanted a piece of the action, asking the chief priests and teachers of the law, where is the Messiah to be born? The answer: in Bethlehem in Judea, out of there will come a ruler who will shepherd the people of Israel. Another ruler indeed, Herod thought! Herod feared a real threat to his rule. He was at war with himself. Although he appeared all powerful, the threat of another ruler showed his lack of any real lasting authority and his deep insecurity. He had, what he thought, was a cunning plan. Herod "*shows out.*" A bit like an adult tantrum, when you can't get your own way, or you have been cornered!

When the Magi had found the child Jesus they were to report back to Herod, so that he could go and worship the child Jesus as well. The Magi were not Wise Men for nothing, they would not be fooled by King Herod. The Magi were not about to disclose their plan, the journey or the destination to Herod. Even after the Magi had visited the child Jesus, they had been *warned in a dream* not to go back to Herod, and so changed routes, to a safe route away from Herod, to return to their own country. It wasn't Herod's path they were to follow; it was God's. Herod didn't make it easy for the Magi though.

In-spite of it all the Magi stuck to their plan, to visit the child Jesus, to bow down and worship Him, open their treasures and present the gifts. They arrived guided by Christ's star and left according to a warning from God in a dream.

So back to Karen. What gifts do we give to Christ in this year of 2025? What are our own gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh? Karen had a good idea of her answers at the end of 2024. The gifts she had received were in those who were kind to her. Most of the people she didn't even know! Karen remembered staff at the local hospice as

she cared for her dying mother. The members of the church and wider community who made Christmas more of a celebration for her and the girls. Meeting Tanya who really listened as they had coffee in the café before Christmas. Those who provided the goodies in the packaged as well as those who delivered the box. These were the real gifts to Karen, her family and to Christ.

So, in 2025, the gifts of the Magi will be found in the care of the vulnerable in our community and wider society. Those we reach out to who are struggling in any number of ways. Perhaps they are the lonely, those who have ill health, are missing a loved one who has died, are struggling financially, perhaps family live overseas. When we reach out to them, we give the gift to Christ. God has gifted to us skills, and talents. When we share these with others, we also give the gift to Christ just as the Magi did. As we gift to Christ we share those gifts with others. We are reminded of this in Matthew chapter 25, verse 40: “in the King’s reply; whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.”

What does the world need most? The gift of time. Our gifts to the Christ child and so given to others are CARE: C.A.R.E: Compassion, Advocacy, Respect and Empathy. Epiphany is about showing: “showing up, showing on and showing out.” The Magi show us once again to increase our understanding and so that we can position ourselves in the world in which we live. Ephesians 3:1-12 proclaims that God’s gift of Christ is still to be manifest to the world: no longer in the physical person of Jesus Christ, but in the church—Christ’s own body—through the unity of its diverse members. Paul focuses on that unity in diversity, equal partners in the church. The greatest gift is the gift we give to others through Christ. *“We show up” like the Magi (we use the gifts bestowed on us by God), “we show on” like King Herod (not in a tantrum but as an advocate for others) and “we show out” (taking our faith outside the walls of the church and in-to the world).* Epiphany is about “showing”, not in the way the world understands in a flashy way but as Christ gifts to us and we gift to Him in our stewardship of those expensive gifts we have received and return to Christ.

There are many King Herod’s in society who might try and get in our way, upset our plan, or change our path. Materialism, commercialism, and violence are some examples. People need people, we are social beings and connection is important for our physical, emotional and social health. Isaiah chapter 60 describes the dark and

the light. We only need to watch the TV news to get a glimpse of the thick darkness over, around and within people. The Lord's people are commanded to reflect the light that the Lord has shone upon them. They and we are to be his witnesses to all nations. The initial command is not to go, but rather first to reflect the light of God's glory. We then take that light into the community and the world. The Lord is the everlasting light of his people.

AMEN