



Pieter Bruegel the Elder 'The Adoration of the Kings'

## Epiphany Message 2024

Dear Friends,

Epiphany is one of the great Christian festivals of the year, commemorating the visit of the Three Kings or Magi to the Christ Child, as Isaiah prophesied: "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Epiphany has been associated with many differing traditions around the world.

In Britain, The Yule Log was lit on Christmas day and remained burning until Twelfth Night in order to bring good fortune to the house for the coming year. Its remains were kept to kindle the next year's Yule log and in addition to protect the house from fire and lightning. For Christians, the symbolism of the Yule log was that it represented the need to keep the stable warm for baby Jesus. These days, log shaped chocolate cakes are eaten around Christmas time for Yule logs.

In Germany, Groups of young people called Sternsinger (Star Singers) travel door to door dressed as the three Wiseman, the leader carrying a star. These singers were offered treats at the homes they visited, but they also asked for donations for worthy causes. The young

people then perform the traditional house blessing by marking the year over the doorway with chalk.

In Greece and Cyprus, the feast is called the Theophany or Phota (Greek for "Lights") and customs revolve around the Great Blessing of the Waters. A long procession is formed and follows whatever road leads to a body of water. Leading the procession are the sacred icons, followed by the priests and oftentimes musicians. At the end of the ceremony a cross is thrown into the water and the men of the community jump in the water to retrieve it. Whoever finds the cross in the icy waters has luck for the rest of the year.

Art has often been used as a medium to present this momentous event.

One of the most striking of the Epiphany pictures is one by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in the National Gallery in London, shown above. It is called the Adoration of the Kings and was painted in 1564. I find it rather unsettling! The faces of the kings and the onlookers are wonderfully portrayed, and that is exactly what I find a little bit forbidding. Etched on the faces is a whole variety of emotions, including human malice and cynicism, whilst some expressions have simple bewilderment. All of the people are gazing – one or two of the soldiers goggle-eyed – at what is going on in front of them.

In front of a poor stable, three kings are giving the most sumptuous gifts to a little baby and his mother. Somebody in the background is bending Joseph's ear: perhaps asking him what's going on; perhaps telling him a joke!

But the really lasting impression that the picture leaves to me, is of a baby and his mother at the mercy of an often cruel and difficult world and of a cruel and difficult people. The lavishness of the gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – somehow highlight the squalor and difficulty of much of human life.

I look at the picture and think of Gaza and Jerusalem, of the Ukraine, of people's inhumanity to people!

One of my favourite Christmas carols is Christina Rossetti's' ***In the Bleak Midwinter***'.

It is a very beautiful poem and a very lovely piece of music. The last verse I find so moving and haunting:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?*

*If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.*

*If I were a wise man, I would do my part.*

*Yet what I can I give him—Give my heart.*

But perhaps far more important than what we give the Lord is what he gives us. People often refer to the feast as the Epiphany as the "manifestation": God showing us himself; God appearing in our midst. God bringing light into the darkness of our lives and world.

What is most important are not gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh but God's love for us, shown in the coming of the Light of the World

"Arise, shine; for your light has come!" That is the marvellous message of hope that

Epiphany proclaims as we enter 2024. May we accept that light, that love into our own hearts.

Happy New Year

David

Vicar