# Be welcoming to travellers

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Epiphany – Isa 60 1-6,  Ps 72 1-7 10-14,  Eph 3 1-12,  Mt 2 1-12

For centuries, the ancient Jewish people longed for the appearance of God’s anointed one; God’s Messiah. Today’s Psalm is full of that longing; for a king whose rule would be an era of justice, peace, shared prosperity, of safety and care for the needy; an era when the whole world would know God’s love. At Christmas, we celebrated the fulfilment of that longing; the king had come. But then what?

Today, Epiphany, we mark another step in the fulfilment of that longing. The word Epiphany means to make known or to reveal. For us in the Church, Epiphany is the moment when ancient Israel’s God was first revealed to the Gentiles – to the non-Jewish nations – to us. In today’s gospel, we witness that event. The nations of the world, represented in the gospel by the three foreign Magi, meet the God of Israel in the child Jesus.

Our church tradition says the Feast of the Epiphany is about a visit. Today’s Gospel recounts the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem where they meet Jesus. For the Church, Christ being revealed to the Magi says God’s original promise to Abraham and Sarah is beginning to be fulfilled – God’s promise that through their offspring, all families of the earth will be blessed. [Gen 12.1-3]

The Magi came to pay homage to the child who, they said, was *born* a king; not crowned like royals usually are. The Magi were strangers; they weren’t of the child’s faith; they weren’t of his race. But they sensed something so extraordinary about Jesus that they journeyed a very long way

to see him. Our tradition says they were the first people to meet Jesus who weren't Israelites. So for us Gentiles who have also come to Jesus, the Magi are our earliest forerunners; the first of us non-Jews to acknowledge him as Lord. And like them, we've been received as his guests, strangers though we were.

If Epiphany signifies the revelation of the God of Israel to the nations – to us –what sort of God has been revealed? What do we learn about God? And is what we find out something new – something people didn't know about God before? Let's see.

The first thing it means is that **God is trustworthy and keeps promises.** God's ancient promise to Abraham *in you, all families of the earth will be blessed* [Gen 12.3] began to happen in this meeting of the infant Jesus and the Magi.

The second thing is that **God is not what people say**. God is not an almighty, remote-controller of everything – who gets blamed for everything that goes wrong. That god is a paper tiger, and not at all the God we believe in. **This baby is what God is really like**: trusting, vulnerable, approachable; gently offering friendship; willing to pass the time of day with us.

The third thing is that **God's not fussy about who God should keep company with**. Everyone's in. Without any diplomatic pre-meeting negotiations, the title *chosen people* is summarily expanded from one nation to all nations. Jesus's place in Bethlehem had no bouncers. The people welcomed in to meet Jesus were not asked any questions about their religious or interpersonal or political preferences.

The fourth thing is that **God is with us in our troubles**. Because of the Magi's visit, the new king is, as VIPs do, about to embark on his first international trip. But it's no state-sponsored junket he sets out on. Jesus will flee as a refugee.

So today, what sort of God is revealed to you? Is this an Epiphany for you too? Is this the God you thought you came to worship today? If not, if this is a different God from the one you expected, what do you do with this surprising discovery? Is this a God you'd recommend to friends? A God they might consider? Sometimes among the guiding of the star, the wisdom of the Mages, the palace intrigues in Jerusalem and the cost and meaning of the gifts, we need reminding that our tradition simply says the Feast of the Epiphany is about a visit; about the honour guests do a host by coming to visit, and the honour of hospitality hosts offer guests.

The chalk inscription on the lintel of our church's street door is a reminder to us that our church doorway is there to be open; and most particularly, it's to be open to all comers. It's a reminder that the church door is not so much *our* entry to *our* church, as it is an entrance beckoning all travellers – different people from us – telling these people, come into our midst and receive the welcome Christ would offer you.

The chalk marks are a sign of welcome to the traveller. They're also a sign to us. They're a call to us to make sure the light of Christ burns brightly here, and shines out from this community to guide travellers to sanctuary amongst us. What we do by honouring guests here transforms and heals. But of course, the important flip side is that it also transforms *us* who are honoured to offer this hospitality.

Let's pray. *Christ Jesus,…though you existed in the form of God, you did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied yourself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in our likeness … humbled yourself by becoming obedient to the point of death…*[Phil 2.6-8] *Thank you.* Amen