

A Sermon for Epiphany 2021

By the Rev. Jackie Bullen

“They knelt down and paid him homage.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

What does it mean to kneel down and pay homage?

These are not commonplace words or experiences.

I wonder if you can think of a time when you chose to bow low before someone or something.

You may not.

Our readings this week address a number of themes related to homage and tribute or, we might say, worship.

We heard in Isaiah 60 of nations streaming toward Israel, for the glory of the Lord has dawned.

The abundance of the sea will be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you ... all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Similar words appear in Psalm 72, as it speaks of the nations' response to the gracious reign of the King of Israel:

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, the kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring gifts. All kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall do him service.

These passages and others are very clearly the background against which we are to hear our Gospel reading today on the journey and gifts of the Magi.

In them the words of Isaiah and the Psalms were fulfilled, even if only in part.

The Scriptures of Israel had long spoken of a time when the whole world would come to see and know that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the Lord of earth and heaven.

They had spoken of a time when all nations would bow down as one, in service of the King of Israel, who would reign “as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another.”

And so it happened.

In the Time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

It was a long journey the Magi had, following the star they had seen.

900 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

For an earthbound caravan in the ancient world, traveling on foot or by camel, it could have taken four months or longer.

You don’t set out on such a journey, carrying precious gifts, unless you’re sure there’s something or someone great ready to greet you on the other side.

After all, the wise men could have died on the way, they could have wandered accidentally from the path, they could have found their timing to be wrong. But they went

They went to offer their gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – and to bow low before the Christ child.

In all this, the Magi are great exemplars of faith; they are examples for us. They fulfilled in part the prophecies of Israel. But they could not fulfil those prophecies in full.

Those prophecies spoke of all nations coming before God, not just a few individuals, however important.

The Magi were the first fruits of a more abundant harvest yet to come.

You could read the whole history of the Christian Church as the gradual growth of that harvest, the slow fulfilment of Isaiah 60, Psalm 72, and other Scriptures.

As Christ sent out his Apostles and evangelists, as the Gospel spread across the Roman and Persian empires in the years that followed, as people called on the name of Jesus in places as far from each other as these isles and China, India, and Ethiopia, all by the Early Middle Ages.

The Christian faith has spread to every continent, almost every country in the past 500 years – we might well claim for such a phenomenon the words of Isaiah: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

The light of the world has shone forth, and many peoples have turned to it in response.

They have joined the wise men, journeying in mind and heart to Bethlehem and to the child lying in the manger, and there they have knelt down and poured out their treasures.

We are called today to join the Magi and these many nations, to join them in their journey of faith and in their bowing low.

The light still shines, brilliant as a new star gleaming in the heavens, promising more than we could ever ask for or imagine:

the knowledge of God,
the revelation of every mystery,
the fulfilment of every good dream and hope of humanity,
and the gift of love, more love than we have ever known.

How far would we go for such promises? Would we travel 900 miles? I'm sure many people would say yes and even further if it is required.

And if we did make that journey, what would we give in response to those promises?

Not many of us could bring gold, frankincense, or myrrh in such quantities as we imagine the Magi could.

For not many of us are so wise; not many of us are so noble or rich (1 Cor 1:26-30).

But we can all bow low.

Remember the familiar words of the carol "In the bleak midwinter,"?

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.

Give my heart.

None of us could bring a more fitting gift than that.

We know this to be true, if we've ever given our heart to a cause or to a person.

Our whole identity and all our thoughts and actions can revolve around that one thing.

In our experience and in the Bible, the heart is the centre of our thoughts, will, and emotion, the centre of our being. It encompasses everything we will ever do or be.

So to give my heart would be to give Christ all, to open the only treasure chest every one of us has, and to pour it out, pour it all out, every precious thing, every fragrant bit of incense, along with every last scrap and even the bits of dust gathering in the corners.

It would be to pour out the good and the bad, to lay everything down, every gift and every burden.

Give my heart – that would be gift enough.

That would be an act of faith, a grand and meaningful gesture for which the language of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh” stands in.

To give my heart: that would be to bow low, to kneel before Jesus in total surrender.

The light of the world is worthy of such a gift.

The Magi “knelt down and paid him homage.”

Today is a day of doing the same.

Each one of us knows how best to do that in our own life, whether for the first time or the thousandth – for it is never something we do once but many times.

It may be by finally making that commitment of faith you’ve been hesitating over.

It may be by beginning to find time each day for prayer: even just 5 minutes, to start.

It may be mentally, emotionally, or spiritually opening up a part of yourself to God that you’ve never dared open up.

Or, you may need to totally change your life.

Why not take this challenge today offered to us all?

Ask yourself, and ask God.

How can I bow low?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**