

Come, See, and Be Changed

*A sermon at Holy Eucharist on the Eve of Epiphany,
2026*

The Revd Andrew Rampton

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus was born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of Herod. After his birth astrologers from the east arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed the rising of his star, and we have come to pay him homage.' King Herod was greatly perturbed when he heard this, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together the chief priests and scribes of the Jews, and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet wrote: "Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a ruler to be the shepherd of my people Israel."' Then Herod summoned the astrologers to meet him secretly, and ascertained from them the exact time when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, so that I may go myself and pay him homage.' After hearing what the king had to say they set out; there before them was the star they had seen rising, and it went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. They were overjoyed at the sight of it and, entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother and bowed low in homage to him; they opened their treasure chests and presented gifts to him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they returned to their own country by another route, for they had been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.

Epiphany declares to us that Jesus Christ has come for everyone's sake. God's working out of salvation must be for all of humanity if gentiles from distant lands can see and understand Jesus for who and what he is. After all, why bring gold for a king, incense for God, and myrrh for one who will die if not to acknowledge that the Christ-child is all of these? God's saving help is for all of us and that is good news.

But not so long ago, through the weeks of Advent, we heard much about how the arrival of the Messiah would also bring with it judgement as part of God's saving work. If salvation is for all, then judgement must be for all. This, at first, may feel less like good news. Judgement, in our society and, for many of us, in the way our faith has been taught to us, only carries negativity. It is what happens to criminals. Those who judge others are often spoken and thought poorly of. And even if we think that we're doing not too badly as individuals, it is easy to cast a glance around the world and wonder. To paraphrase Fr Robert Crouse, if the world seems to be God-forsaking, we begin to worry that it might become God-forsaken. Christmas and Epiphany are proof that, though we may not be watching for God, making new gods, or looking for God in all the wrong places, God has not abandoned us. Quiet the opposite, in fact.

When God appears among us at Christmas and makes a home in humanity, it demands a response. Nobody who encounters the living God can walk away from it unchanged. Whether we are delighted, confused, or outraged by God's appearance in our midst has much to do with where we are standing when we realize what

AFFILIATION Church of St John the Evangelist, Hamilton

CORRESPONDENCE andrew@bookishpriest.com

has happened. Like so many important events, one's angle of view and the assumptions that one brings can greatly change how we perceive what has happened.

For the shepherds who came from the fields to meet Jesus and adore him, the appearance of God in their midst was very good news indeed. The promises of prophets whose stories they would have heard claim over and over that, when the Messiah comes, it will signal a time of justice for the least in their society. There were few groups of people in Jesus' society thought less of than shepherds. These meek ones would finally see their promised inheritance.

For the magi, the appearance of God in their midst was a curious thing. An unexpected star had appeared in the sky, throwing their astrological art into some disarray. This was not how the heavenly bodies were supposed to move. Not only was the star a matter of professional curiosity for them, but they also felt compelled to follow it. The star's movement suggested to them that there was something important to see and know. So convincing was God's work through the medium familiar to them, that they packed up a retinue and began the long journey to a far-off land, certain they would meet someone of great importance. And so, they did, but what a strangeness, to find the most important person they would ever meet in such poor circumstances. So far from the palace in Jerusalem as to have escaped Herod's notice until the magi let the news slip.

For Herod, of course, the appearance of God in the midst of his country was dire news indeed. Herod fancied himself a man of great importance and power. After all, he was the ruler of Judea, was he not? Well, not in truth. His rule was at the pleasure of Roman authorities. His power and influence and importance

were fragile things, easily broken or taken away by those who had placed him on the throne he so loved.

And for all of his grandstanding and bravado, Herod knows this. He knows, somewhere deep in his heart, that he is a small man of no true power or importance. He is a pathetic man in the very old sense of the word, meaning one worthy of pity. So of course, when he is informed of a challenge to his oh-so-delicate power, he responds with deceit and outrage, culminating in the slaughter of innocents across the land. Those with so little of true value often defend their worthless hoards with the greatest ferocity. They wreak havoc on their neighbours out of their desperation to maintain the illusion that they are rich or powerful or influential or whatever they have made their idol.

Jesus Christ has been described for centuries as both glorious and terrible, and it is all of these experiences that reveal both titles as true. In the presence of Christ, the truth is revealed. The light that reveals the faithfulness of the shepherds and the care God has for them is the same light that reveals all of Herod's posturing to be nothing more than empty shadows, dispelled when faced with God's truth. No one can approach God and leave unchanged, having seen the truth of their own lives laid out naked before them.

Though change can be unsettling, God is always working to change us for the better. The shepherds and magi both went home amazed by what they had seen, wondering at the glory of God. Herod responded with greed, selfishness, and murder, but he need not have. Imagine the opportunity Herod had, to see his fantasies for what they were, to set them aside, and return to the God who loved him so much as to share this good news with him. What glory might have

been if Herod had responded in faith, rather than forsaking what he was offered?

This is the judgement of God, spoken of through Advent, made present to us at Christmas, and revealed again and again through Christ. That we should be given the opportunity to see the truth and to respond as we will. So, like the shepherds and the magi, come. Come to the manger with the shepherds and the magi to see the babe who is the Light of the world. Come to the Word and rejoice in good news for the poor, the forgotten and the oppressed. Come to the table and feast with the God who casts down the mighty from their seats and fills the hungry with good things. Come and be changed in faith for glory. This feast is for you.