

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 04 January 2026, Epiphany

Collect *(the Church's prayer for today):*

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the
earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Creator of the heavens,
who led the Magi by a star
to worship the Christ-child:
guide and sustain us,
that we may find our journey's
end
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Readings: Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

Beginning the New Year with a careful search

There is something profoundly and reassuringly human about the story of the Magi. It is a story that begins not with certainty, but with longing. Not with answers, but with questions. Not with a map, but with a star. This Epiphany story invites us into that same pattern — the pattern of seeking, discovering, worshipping, offering, and returning changed. It is, in many ways, the pattern of life, of Christian pilgrimage and discipleship.

And perhaps it is no coincidence that Epiphany arrives just as we step into a new year. A time when many of us may already be asking: What am I seeking? What direction am I travelling? What might God be revealing?

So, here is my invitation to walk with the Magi — slowly, attentively — allowing their journey to illuminate our own.

Matthew tells us almost nothing about these travellers. Tradition has filled in the gaps — kings, camels, exotic robes — but the Gospel simply calls them “Magi”: seekers, astrologers, people who watched the skies for signs of meaning. In some respects, the Magi represent all humanity: creatures who seek to make meaning; people who sense that there is more to life than what is immediately visible.

The Magi see a star, and they set out. No guarantees. No clarity about where the road will lead. Just a conviction that something — or someone — is calling.

Herod's words echo through the story: "Make a careful search for the child." Herod speaks these words for all the wrong reasons, but the instruction itself is sound. Faith is not passive. It is not something we drift into. It is a careful search — a willingness to ask, to wrestle, to walk, to keep going even when the path is unclear.

So, at the start of this new year, Epiphany asks us:

What is it that we are seeking?

Are we careful in our search for meaning, purpose, and God?

Because the Christian life does not begin with certainty. It begins with desire — with a star that stirs something in us — and with the courage to follow.

After a long and winding journey, the Magi arrive not at a palace, but at a house. Not before a king on a throne, but before a toddler on his mother's lap. And Matthew tells us that they are "overjoyed."

This is such a striking detail. These Magi are far from home. They are likely exhausted. They have no idea what this discovery will mean for them. They are standing on the threshold of mystery. And yet — joy.

Not the joy of everything being sorted out. Not the joy of certainty. But the joy that comes when God surprises us. The joy that breaks in even when life is complicated, even when we are unsure of the next step.

Epiphany joy is not naïve. It is not escapist. It is the joy of discovering that God is present in the unexpected place, the ordinary house, the vulnerable child.

So the question comes to us:

Are we ready and open to being surprised by joy?

Because God's joy often arrives in the midst of everything else — in the middle of our questions, our tiredness, our confusion — just as it did for the Magi.

Before they say a word, before they offer a gift, before they ask a question, the Magi fall to their knees. They bow down and worship.

This is the heart of Epiphany. This is the heart of discipleship. When we encounter God — truly encounter God — the only fitting response is worship. Not because God demands it, but because God deserves it. The Creator of all things, revealed in the vulnerability of a child, draws from us a response of awe, humility, and love. Worship is not something we do to impress God. It is something we do because we have glimpsed the truth of who God is.

So Epiphany asks us:

Do we bow down in worship?

Not just on Sundays, but in the quiet moments of our lives — in our decisions, our relationships, our priorities. Worship is not a posture of the body alone; it is a posture of the heart.

After worship comes offering. The Magi open their treasures and present gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. We often spiritualise these gifts — kingship, divinity, suffering — and there is truth in that. But there is also something wonderfully simple here: the Magi give what they have.

These are the tools of their trade. The things they have gained and used through their work as astrologers and diviners. They offer Jesus not something abstract, but something real — something that represents their identity, their livelihood, their story. And that is the invitation to us.

What gifts do we have to offer?

Not the gifts we wish we had. Not the gifts someone else has. But the gifts that are ours — our skills, our time, our compassion, our resources, our creativity, our presence.

What might it look like for us, at the start of this year, to open our treasures before God? What might it look like for this community of St James' to offer its gifts for the sake of God's kingdom?

Finally, the Magi go home. But they do not go back the way they came. Matthew tells us they “returned to their country by another route.”

On one level, this is practical. They want to avoid awkward questions from Herod. But on a deeper level, “another route” is symbolic. You cannot meet Christ and remain unchanged. You cannot kneel in worship and then walk the same old paths. Encounter leads to transformation. Revelation leads to reorientation. Epiphany is not just about seeing the light. It is about walking in it.

So the final question is this:

Are we ready and open to being changed by God?

Are we willing to take another route — to live differently, to love differently, to hope differently — because we have encountered Christ?

The Magi show us the shape of Christian pilgrimage and discipleship:

We seek — because something in us longs for God.

We discover joy — often in unexpected places.

We worship — because God is worthy.

We offer our gifts — because everything we have comes from God.

We return changed — because encounter leads to transformation.

This is the invitation of Epiphany.

This is the invitation of a new year.

This is the invitation of Christ himself.

So may we set out with courage.

May we be surprised by joy.

May we bow down in worship.

May we open our treasures.

And may we return by another route — changed, renewed, and ready to walk this new year in the light of God's love.

Amen.

