

Watching Correctly (Matthew 2:1-12)

Holy Communion – 4th January 2026

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² 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.’³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Well today we find ourselves embarking upon a new season. I don't mean Winter or Spring, although of course the days are now getting longer – as I'm sure you have all noticed! January is so often a month of heads-down and get on with it!

Epiphany is our new season, which is hot on the heels of Advent and Christmas. Recall that the *holy expectation* and predictions of God's plan, then became a reality in the actual arrival of his Son Jesus Christ. **God was in it all, and without Him it couldn't have happened any other way.** The Epiphany season is elementary for establishing the basis of much of Christian theology. This is where we learn that God has chosen to make himself known, that has revealed himself. Do please keep a watch in the Sunday readings for that theme of what we are being told about Christ, and why we are being told it.

That revealing act of God begins to emerge for us today, with the story of the wise men and what they saw. There is also the contrasting attitude of King Herod, which although profoundly negative, does also give us a different insight into how some will react to the revealing of Christ. Further contrast is found in the Baptism of Christ which comes next week. The instant shock of Herod to those who just turned up with such news, compares to those faithful Simeon and Anna who embrace baby Jesus as the one they had been waiting for in hope for so long.

Let's just read again the first four verses from Matthew's gospel today:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² 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.'³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

So, as I've said, there is a contrast to be found here in how the wise men and Herod took the news. Those wise men seem to have been watching and waiting for some time because they '*observed his star at its rising*'. I'm fairly sure they would not have noticed the star at all unless they had been looking into the sky with some sense of anticipation. Apparently, they were astrologers, and so that's what they did anyway. But quite what they were expecting to see we cannot be certain. Nevertheless, what is clear is that they had **an openness to something new**, something big to happen, that would be nothing short of an event to affect both Heaven and Earth. That star triggered a long journey to find out more and ask: *where is he?* **They were looking and they were asking, they were prepared to react and as we like to out it – take a risk.**

As a church leader, I've known for a long time now that God works primarily through people, and particularly the gifts and skills that they have. One of our own key projects for 2026 is to complete and launch the Link Community Hub Project. A great deal of work has been going on for some four years, to make it a reality. The opportunity has always been there, in the community and the needs of people, yet it was the conditions to make it possible and the proximity of those capable, which has meant the time is now. I have no doubt that God has worked through his placement of the talents needed. It will be interesting to see how the Link Community Hub will shape us as a church.

The complete opposite was the attitude of King Herod. He too reacted to hearing about a new action of God, for when he learns of this Messiah coming, he asks the religious leaders to enquire what the prophecies might confirm about where this character could appear.

⁵They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’

We can surely say that Herod took the matter just as seriously as the Magi did. Herod, like the Wise Men, believed that it was all quite true. But that is where the similarities end. King Herod does not question the prophecies, far from it. He fully expects them to be fulfilled at some point. But to put it bluntly, Herod either didn’t want God to act, or he wanted to be able to control the actions of God to his advantage. Herod’s reaction was to eradicate anyone else being involved.

I think it is quite feasible for a person to live in full expectation that there is a God out there, but to do nothing at all about it at all. But it can get worse than that. What diabolical nature is needed to hijack the will of God for one’s own ends? The Nativity story which we don’t tell is the ‘Slaughter of the Innocents!’ King Herod was not open to such change though others and the result was the tragic death of many baby boys for which he is notoriously remembered. We can only imagine the severity of God’s judgement upon him. Our failure to react to God’s call may be less notorious, but still a failure.

The revelation of God challenges everyone. God is highly active all the time. It is one of the reasons that we pray, because we want God to act in some way that we would like to see. **But we must be a little careful because we have a God who wishes to make changes sometimes.** God does not always answer our prayers, that much we certainly know. He may choose to do things that are not clear to us. He can see well beyond our normalities. Somehow, I think 2026 is going to be a year of change, quite apart from ourselves. **Are we watchful and reflective to try and discern how God is working out his purposes out in and around us?**

I am clear that part of my role here as Rector in the parish is to be watchful, and patient. Sitting on my computer at home is a document that lists out many of the things I would like to achieve for 2026. Back in November the council and ministry leaders met for a day to consider the vision of the church for the next three years. Some of our plans will happen and some of them will not, or at least not as we had expected. But we shall offer it to God and try to watch for how God leads us.

And here is the key point, if God works through people, then that might be you. In fact, I would go so far as to say that God has a role for everyone. Of all that has been done in this parish in recent years, and all of it differently, none of it could have worked without people seeing their own guiding stars and then **following them in openness of heart.**

Throughout this year too, and probably beginning quite soon, I am going to be lighting stars in front of those who I feel God is calling and asking them to make a journey towards something new. There may be some shocks, as some have already found, but it is God who calls and directs. **I find in myself that Epiphany is the most spiritual of the seasons, fresh in the year and showing God amongst us in new ways. Keep that thought in your own mind.**

Amen