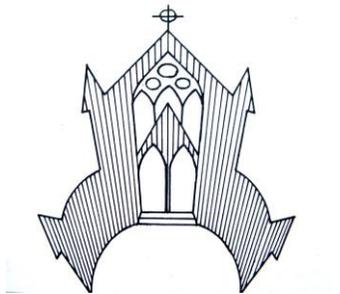
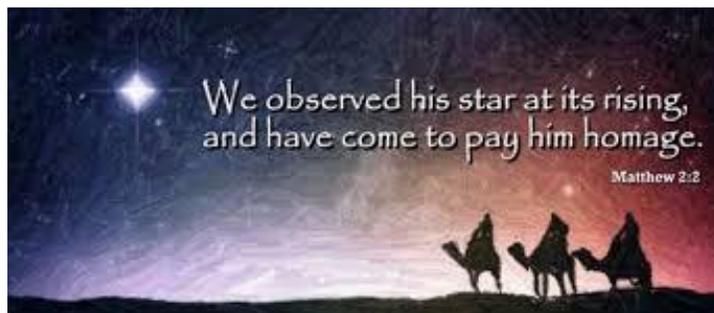


# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2022**



## **A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources**

Arise, shine for your light has come!

As the magi followed the star to a new place, a place where dreams became reality, let us follow our Lord and saviour to a place of renewed hope.

Not looking back, but always moving forward, let us seek and find the king. Lord Jesus, we gather at the start of a new year, we gather to worship you.

May you journey with us always, especially through the dark and uncomfortable places, and into places filled with hope and new possibilities, into a place of light and love.

**Amen**

## **Lectionary Readings:**

**Isaiah 60 v1-6** (p746) The Glory of Zion

**Psalms 72 v1-7, 10-14** (p585) All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.

**Ephesians 3 v1-12** (p1169) Faith or Observance of the Law

**Matthew 2 v1-12** (p966) The Visit of the Magi

## **No Going Back**

This week our focus explores emerging from the darkness with new hope. The wise men journey through the darkness, trusting that a star will lead them to a child. Herod sees this birth of a new king as a threat. But the wise men arrive safely and worship the Christ child, overwhelmed with joy and hope. However, they avoid Herod on their journey home.

As we recall the journey of the magi, we explore also the journeys we make as individuals and as church communities, and where they might lead us in the coming year. Emerging from the difficult journeys of the past couple of years with renewed hope, Jesus walks beside us.

Isaiah's invitation to 'Arise, shine, for your light has come' (Isaiah 60 v1) is all the more amazing for the fact it was written shortly after the return from the Babylonian exile, when much of the leadership of Judah had been in captivity. These words of hope and promise, which we read as a foreshadowing of the visit of the magi, were written in the middle of wreckage. The Temple had been torn down and Jerusalem was a shadow of its former self. Nonetheless, Isaiah invites his readers to live on God's promises and to look at the world with God's eyes. We can then see, even in times of wreckage, hope drawing close.

Isaiah acknowledges that, after the exile, things can never be the same for the people of God. How they relate to those who are beyond the community – the stranger and foreigner – is forever changed. This works in two directions: God's chosen must show forth the light of God, but equally they must not be afraid of those drawn to it. Those written off as outsiders will bring gifts of their own and praise for the living God that will enrich God's community.

Kingship is, perhaps, a rather old-fashioned concept – something we associate with 'The Crown' or 'Game of Thrones' rather than the modern age.

However, Psalm 72 invites us to remember, even in the modern age, that sovereignty matters. There will always be people who are in charge or who are figureheads. The psalm is a request to God to ensure that those in charge focus on what truly matters. Those who rule us must not be focused on themselves but on ensuring they stand up for the poor and needy against oppression. In any age, that is a challenging and worthy calling.

Human beings seem to have a genius for drawing artificial lines. There are 'in groups' and 'out groups' at schools, in churches and in workplaces. Some of these lines may have understandable causes: many want to feel safe or comfortable in their friendship groups or work environments, and none of us relate to every person or group equally. Even Jesus had an inner circle. In Ephesians 3 v1-12, Paul reminds us that the God we see in Jesus comes to break down lines of separation. His love and promise are for all. Here Paul tells the people of Ephesus that Gentiles are fellow heirs with the Jewish people. It is revolutionary stuff. To be a 'co-heir' means that non-Jewish people, for the first time, come fully into the inheritance promised long ago to the Jews by God. Non-Jews are no longer looking on from the side-lines. Jesus has shown that God's love knows no bounds. The Jews remain the people of God, but the blessing has broken forth, and those on the outside are invited into the circle of blessing. After this, there is no going back: not for God, or the people of Ephesus, nor for us.

It is almost impossible to speak of the 'wise men' without being cast back into sentimental images drawn from childhood Nativities. However, the story of the visit of the magi to the infant Christ, as described in Matthew 2 v1-12, is full of grit and grace. It is a story of outsiders and foreigners who, with no more than a star to guide them, take the risk of leaving their homes in search of the King of the Jews.

The journey must have been slow by modern standards. There is an old Latin phrase, '*solvitur ambulando*', that means 'It is solved as we walk.' It captures the truth that going for a walk or taking a break can help us solve problems, especially ones we've worried over for ages. We may wonder what was solved by the magi as they travelled at the walking pace of camels. Perhaps, at times, their anxiety and doubt rose. Despite having a star to guide them, they were walking into the dark. They met a man, Herod, who looked like a king but was not – at least not the one they sought. Finally, in Bethlehem, they found an infant, living very humbly, who was a true king. The magi had

no doubt they'd found what they were looking for. Perhaps, in their walk towards Bethlehem, they realised there was no going back to their old ways. Perhaps God allowed the scales to fall from their eyes, so they could see the truth: God's glory was to be found in the road less travelled.

Have you seen the new Spider-Man film yet? A lot of people have! It's currently the highest grossing film of 2021 having already taken \$1 billion globally - I think it's fair to say that people love Spider-Man and the Marvel Universe. One popular lockdown activity was to try and watch every Marvel film in chronological order. Back in 2020 that was 23 films - not to mention the various TV show spin-offs. You certainly need to carve out a chunk of time to do the whole lot!

But perhaps the more interesting question than *have* you seen the new Spider-Man film yet, is *why* have you been to see the new Spider-Man film? The Marvel Universe contains some undeniably dark forces, the villainous Mysterio to name one. But I don't think the appeal of the films is to do with the villains, it's all about the heroes. Although they are often flawed and difficult, the Marvel heroes are relentless in their pursuit of a better world: they are all ultimately reaching for the light. In the nativity story, it was the wise men who searched for the light. They followed the star which would eventually lead them to a child who represented hope in a dark world. And the great thing about these ancient heroes is that the hope they found is still with us today. It's hard to battle the forces which oppress our world and most of us lack superhero skills. But we can all hold onto the hope of the child the wise men found, because with him we have hope for a better world, hope for the future.

#### **Sending Out Prayer:**

God of hope, Jesus our companion, Holy Spirit our strength, travel with us as we journey onwards into paths known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar, through times of darkness and into your marvellous light, always knowing that you are by our side.

**Amen**