

Epiphany



Frankincense trees growing in Oman

On 6th January each year many Christian churches around the world celebrate Epiphany.

This is a celebration that commemorates the visit of so-called Magi to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, Palestine.

These Magi are often referred to as kings such as in the Christmas carol *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. However, others regard the Magi not as kings but as scholars, astrologers, or Zoroastrian priests from Persia.

In the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew states that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Magi came from the East to worship him:

“The star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh”.

Frankincense is a rare and precious tree gum used in perfumes and Myrrh is a bitter resin used in sacred anointing oils.

Of course, some people do not believe this Biblical account of the Magi's visit to Jesus. However, other people do and various branches of Christianity including the Catholic Church, Church of England and the Lutheran Church celebrate Epiphany with a variety of customs and traditions.

Customs

In South American countries such as Argentina, the day is called "*Día De Reyes*" (Day of Kings) and little children expectantly leave their shoes by the front door the evening before, endearingly along with grass and water for the kings' camels. On the morning of 6th January, they get up early hoping to see if any presents or treats have been left in their shoes.

In Belgium, a delicious frangipane filled pastry called a *Galette des Rois* (Kings Cake) is eaten on 6th January. This crown shaped cake contains a hidden charm or figurine and the lucky child who gets the piece of cake with the trinket inside becomes a king or queen for the day.

Every 6th January in the city of Aix-en-Provence, Southern France, a joyful parade of children and adults dressed in traditional Provençal costumes, accompanied by real camels, progress to the Saint Sauveur Cathedral. This two hour long procession moves to the triumphal tune of *March of the Kings* played by drummers and musicians.



The enchanting Aix-en-Provence Epiphany Parade.

The Star

Central to the Epiphany story is the **Star of Bethlehem**, a star which the Magi saw in the Eastern night sky and which miraculously moved ahead of them.

Where did these Magi come from? Some scholars say Yemen or Syria. Who were those mysterious people? Some traditions say they were called *Melchior, Caspar* and *Balthazar*, but no one really knows. And how many of them were there? Just because they gave three types of gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) doesn't necessarily mean there were only three Magi.

Wherever they journeyed from, whoever they were and how ever many came, they plainly spent time carefully observing the night sky, because they noticed a new star appear and travel in the universe.

Maybe these kings possessed learning of Hebrew Scriptures passed down centuries earlier from when Daniel was taken captive to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The Old Testament books of Jeremiah, Micah and Isaiah had prophesied about the coming of Christ and the Psalmist written, "***The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him with gifts***".

Perhaps the Magi were unaware that they were fulfilling this prophecy, but they did not follow the star out of a random fascination. They had a clear understanding of what this cosmic phenomenon meant because they purposefully came with treasures and said, "***We saw his star when it arose and have come to worship him***".



Giotto's beautiful fresco, "The Adoration of the Magi", painted on the walls of the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Northern Italy in 1304. Note the Star of Bethlehem artistically depicted as a comet above the stable.

Modern Life

In the days of the Magi, over two thousand years ago, people were much more connected to the outdoors and seasons.

Nowadays, people are less connected to nature and spend most time indoors. Many people live in towns and cities caught up in the hurly burly of crowds, noise and traffic, working indoors in offices, retail or hospitality premises and spending leisure time at home watching TV or using smartphones.

If you asked a person on the street in Birmingham, what phase the moon was at e.g. Full, New, waxing or waning, chances are they would not know and may not even know what you meant.

2024 has been a highly unstable and troubled year with lots of frightening and gloomy news.

Bloody wars are raging in Gaza (as at 5th November 2024, there had been 1,706 Israelis, 43,301 Palestinians and 3,002 Lebanese killed), Ukraine (11,973 civilians killed up to 30th September 2024) and Burma (2,414 civilians killed during 2024).

Political rioting has taken place in England with anti-immigration protests in July following the fatal stabbing of three young girls in Southport; violent demonstrations occurred in Venezuela after a disputed presidential election and also in Bangladesh leading to over 200 student protester deaths and the exile of President Hasina.

There is a catastrophic economic crisis in South Sudan where half of the 11 million population is facing starvation; in the Central African Republic, tragically seven out of ten children are unable to attend school and in the Caribbean island of Haiti gang violence has led to over 700,000 people sadly being displaced from their homes.

In the UK, a heart-breaking 40,048 disclosures of domestic abuse have been recorded against women and children. There was also a disturbing record 593 Police officers sacked in the UK for corruption and misconduct including rape, discriminatory social media posts and dishonesty offences.

The new UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, inappropriately failed to declare on the MP's Register of Interests thousands of pounds of designer clothes given free to his wife by a millionaire Labour Party financial donor; Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, resigned in disgrace after it was revealed that he had failed to disclose vital information to the Police about child abuser John Smyth; and in the Isle of Man it was revealed that a deplorable £700,000 of Manx taxpayers' money is spent annually keeping the Lieutenant Governor in the lap of luxury at Government House with 8 members of staff and a gardening bill alone of £97,491.

There have been increasing human rights violations for example in North Korea where as many as 50,000 Christians are held in brutal political prisoner centres such as the *Chongjin* concentration camp as enemies of the state; in Saudi Arabia where hundreds of Yemeni and Ethiopian migrants continue to be mercilessly shot at by Saudi border guards and in Afghanistan where girls shockingly remain completely banned from all secondary schools and universities by the Taliban government.

Would there be less of this strife, inequality, wickedness, crime and suffering in the world if people were more **connected to nature**? Even if they perhaps strolled amongst beautiful Spring cherry tree blossom in the local park, watched a crimson sunrise, scented a rose, meditated by a sleepy river, got their fingers in the soil helping out at a community garden, looked up at the clear blue sky, sat quietly listening to a Robin's song, felt the warmth of the Summer sun, admired towering Cumulonimbus clouds or tasted a salty sea breeze? These are some very simple things that people could try to do, even in a city where urban life can be overwhelming.

In other words, if people appreciated nature more, would they feel more positive and at peace with themselves and the world consequently become that little bit better? Is it too fanciful to think that maybe Creation's harmony can help heal the world?

Signs in the Sky

In 2024, there have been four *Super Moons* (where the full moon appears brighter and larger than normal), a dramatic total eclipse of the sun across North America on 8th April and a spectacular *Perseid Meteor Shower* in August, as well as numerous colourful crimson and green *Aurora Borealis* (Northern Lights) visible from the UK.

Mesmerising Northern Lights over Peel Castle, Isle of Man on 10th October 2024, below.



“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork”.

A good resolution

Rather than looking downwards and being downcast, if we instead looked upwards and saw the easily recognisable *Plough* constellation, would we be more gentle? If we looked upwards at the end of the night just before dawn and saw the final star still visible, the bright *Morning Star* (Venus), would we be more kind? And if we had looked upwards and seen the astonishing once in every 85,000 years *Tsuchinshan-Atlas Comet* blazing through the night sky on 14th October this year, would our souls be more humble?



The exceptionally rare Tsuchinshan-Atlas Comet over Point Of Ayre Lighthouse, Isle of Man in 2024 – what will the world be like in another 85,000 years, when it next visits the Earth?

And so, whether or not there was a travelling **Star of Bethlehem** which the Magi followed and which stopped over a manger, perhaps it would still be a good New Year's resolution for 2025 to spend more time *looking upwards*.

"I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help".

HAPPY NEW YEAR

In Manx Gaelic: *Blein Vie Noa*