

**Tuesday 6 January 2026,  
Epiphany Choral Eucharist  
Isaiah 60: 1-6  
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

Today is a mystery. No one quite knows why the Church came to celebrate the Epiphany on the sixth of January. No one is certain in which city or province of the ancient Roman Empire the Epiphany was first declared to be a feast. And no one is really sure exactly what this feast day is meant to commemorate; at least there was a significant diversity of view for the first several centuries of the Church's existence.

We who are gathered here today probably have a more certain opinion: today we celebrate the arrival of the Magi at the home of the child Jesus in Bethlehem. They are here at our crib even now. It's a slight fudge to have them presenting their gifts to the baby Jesus, because he was probably at least 2 years old by the time they got themselves to Jerusalem to ask Herod where to find the one who had been born King of the Jews. Nevertheless, they open their treasures and lay before the holy child the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The commonest interpretation of these gifts is that they represent Jesus' kingship, his divinity, and his role as one who would die a sacrifice for sin. But they would have had practical uses as well. When Joseph and Mary had to take Jesus and flee to Egypt, the gold would have come in very handy for food and lodging. Frankincense has a medicinal value as an anti-inflammatory-both when burned and when made into a liquid balm- and this would have been useful for the hardworking carpenter, Joseph. Myrrh also had a medicinal quality as a treatment for coughs, skin conditions, and stomach ailments. One can imagine Mary preparing a home remedy passed down to her from her mother using these valuable ingredients.

It can be easy for us to turn these extremely useful gifts into mere symbols. Although on the symbolic side, one could do worse than to recall that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were precisely the gifts offered by kings to the god Apollo at his shrine in Miletus. Apollo was god whose origin was a place of no reputation and who was known as a healer. He was the most beautiful of the ancient Greco-Roman gods and as his epithet Apollo Phoebus suggests, was associated with the light of the sun. Matthew's gospel gives us many connections to consider, not simply those he notes clearly as taken from the Old Testament prophets.

Today is indeed a day of mystery. It is a day full of rich imagery, deeply woven historical narrative, and of symbolism beyond that which we commonly consider. It is also a day of discovery, as the name 'Epiphany' which means 'revelation', suggests. Jesus Christ is discovered by the magi to be the king they were seeking in the stars. He is discovered to be the God-man, born from eternity in our own flesh. He is discovered as the greater-than-Apollo, greater than the one whose light is the sun and who was also called 'intonsus', unshorn, denoting eternal youth.

Today is a glorious day on which we glimpse God's plan for his Son. As yet another mysterious Epiphany tradition, the Noviritis, the announcement of the date of Easter, suggests, today is the revelation of the end of the story of redemption: Jesus is revealed as one who was born to die, and to rise again.

Therefore know, dear brothers and sisters, that as we have rejoiced at the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ so by leave of God's mercy we announced to you also the joy of his resurrection, who is our Saviour. On the eighteenth day of February will fall Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the fast of the most sacred Lenten season. On the fifth day of April you will celebrate with joy Easter Day, the Paschal feast of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.