

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	4 January 2026
Service:	Epiphany Procession
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

'Epiphany' is a splendid word in itself but an even more splendid one to describe this festival in the Christian Year. It is a splendid word because it means, 'shining forth, manifestation' and 'the appearing of glory.' As when the sun comes up on a summer's morning or when we suddenly glimpse a full moon on a winter's night, it speaks of a radiant event which takes our breath away and fills us with wonder.

But there are also other more gentle epiphanies, grace-filled moments, which make us stop and wonder: the beauty of music or a great work of art, the dawning of a truth, the smile of a child or the devotion on the face of a dog. Epiphany always means a shining out, a joyful radiance that stops us in our tracks and makes us see the world afresh.

And in the Christian calendar, the epiphany is also a splendid festival. We recall the coming of wise men from the east guided by a star, to visit the baby Jesus at Bethlehem. We have just experienced some of that splendour, figured forth for us today in our epiphany procession, unique to this cathedral. It offers us a kaleidoscope of joy and light, a splendid way to celebrate this feast and to draw our Christmas festivities to a fitting conclusion.

But have you ever asked yourself what it might have been like for those wise men, whom we traditionally call kings? The gospel passage we heard today doesn't say anything about that. There came wise men from the east we are told, guided by a star.

Guided also by an angel they outwitted the evil King Herod, who, when they had been and gone, vented his rage on innocent mothers and children in Bethlehem.

But what was it really like for those wise men? They had left home on an improbable adventure, guided only by the light of a star, journeying all the way from what is now Iraq or Iran. We can imagine their families and friends asking them before departure if they had perhaps gone mad: heading west, but in search of what – a pipe dream? Travelling through deserts, perhaps through hostile territory. Not much splendour in that: thirsty in sandy wastes and afflicted by heat and flies.

But still less splendour awaited them when they arrived. They had set out with the promise that they would see a newborn king. Yet it was no palace over which the star finally stopped nor was his mother a princess or a queen. What they met was a poor family, simple people from Nazareth. They were at least spared the poverty of the stable because Mary had been relocated to someone's house, though no doubt one of very modest proportions.

We might be forgiven for wondering if, initially, those wise men might have felt a little bit foolish or at least disappointed. Wise kings trekking all that distance just to see that! We do not know.

But we do know that having accomplished their journey they seem to have got the point and crowned it with what really mattered. Oriental kings were used to servants doing them extravagant homage but suddenly they were moved to do it themselves, for the gospel says that they fell down before him and worshipped him.

It was a very eastern-style gesture. Greeks and Jews would not prostrate themselves before any kings. But those wise men saw God's wisdom in the infant Christ.

They saw that Jesus was no mere earthly king. Notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary - the obvious poverty of his circumstances - notwithstanding the sheer unlikelihood of it all, they recognised that the star had not misled them. They saw that this Jesus was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the hope of Israel and the desire of all the nations. And so, they fell down before him and adored him, offering him gifts worthy of his dignity. His humble family in its poverty both concealed and revealed the King of Kings. That is the 'great and mighty wonder' of which we have been singing at Christmas. It is the epiphany - the manifestation, the shining forth, the appearance of God's glory.

The epiphany shows us something vital. If we want to see God, we need to adjust our expectations. As at Bethlehem, God does not usually reveal himself in what we think of as splendour. He did not appear like that to the wise men,

nor to the shepherds who got there them. He appeared rather in an utterly unexpected way - in poverty, humility and simplicity. So it is for us today. Where will we meet Jesus and in him God? In the simplest circumstances of our daily lives, in the ordinary round, in poverty and suffering - our own and that of others. There God's glory is concealed but also revealed. The epiphany teaches us to learn new ways of seeing.

But it also tells us what to do. The wise men worshipped him. They did that because in Jesus they recognised God's Wisdom-incarnate, hidden in that child. If like them, we also fall down in humility and worship him in prayer, then God's light will slowly shine within us and lead us in unexpected ways.

May the appearing of the infant Jesus in his epiphany bring us all to recognise his light, worship him in love, and follow him in faith; and may we see him one day face to face in glory, when he shows himself in his full and final epiphany. Amen.