**3rd January 2020**

**Call to worship**

**A new year has begun.
Let us leave behind all that is past,
and walk together into the future.
Let us trust in the God of new beginnings,
and worship the God of fresh hopes.**

**HYMN: Worship the Lord**

**Prayer**
Glorious Lord, we your sons and daughters
come together into your kingly presence.
We lift our eyes to you, seeking your guiding light
and offering up our gifts of worship and praise.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Father God, full of wisdom and power,
whose mighty arm stretches over all the earth:
**we bow down in humble adoration.**

Holy Saviour, full of grace, lighting up our world:
**we bow down in humble adoration.**

Spirit of the living God,
full of the boundless riches available to us in Christ:
**Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three in one:**
**we bow down in humble adoration,**
**open to your direction.**
**Amen.**



**Prayers of penitence**

A prayer of confession

Lord, just as the wise men set out into new territory in search
of you, help us to step out of life’s narrow tramlines.
Forgive us for seeking you out only in areas we know and in which we
are comfortable.
In their day, the wise men were outsiders, yet were guided by a star and spoken to in a dream; their steps directed for your purpose.
Forgive us when we fail to see – or even dismiss – your leading from unexpected places and unlikely people.

Lord, forgive us.
Widen our vision and expand our minds
to search and discern you in all places and people,
that we may be drawn closer to you. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Father God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ
to be born in a lowly manger;
a heavenly king worshipped by earthly kings,
yet destined to walk to the cross.
Through his blood shed on the cross:
we are forgiven.
Thanks be to God. **Amen.**



**Matthew 2.1-12**

A few weeks ago I bought a diary for 2021. More in hope than anything else; hoping that I may use it in this coming year. 2020’s diary had a lot of cancellations and empty pages.

At this time of the year there are always multiple attempts across the media to try and summarise the year just past[[1]](#endnote-1). For 2020 the need to try and [make sense](https://inews.co.uk/news/analysis/power-behind-boris-johnson-no-10-disgrace-2020-rise-fall-dominic-cummings-803830), [find hope](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/dec/30/2020-wasnt-all-bad-sporting-tales-that-lifted-the-lockdown-gloom) and [seize on signs of optimism](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55405289) has reached fever pitch. Finding a way to talk about a complicated year is fraught with difficulty. 2020 has been cloaked with darkness for so many of us that chinks of light are hard to see. But the picture is always complex, dark and light always coexist. Wednesday’s announcement of the [Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine approval](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/dec/30/oxford-astrazeneca-covid-vaccine-approved-by-uk-regulator) was given alongside further lockdowns, disruption to the start of the school term, and major outbreaks of the variant virus. Light and darkness knitted together in one day’s news. As we enter this new year the reality of Brexit will be felt, for good or for ill – it will take time to assess the impact on our future.

The story of the Magi shows us that God’s guiding light persists in the darkness.

The birth of a baby in 1st century Bethlehem also came at a time of social disruption and uncertainty. The politics of the day and order for people to return to register for a census in the town of their family meant the child ended up being born in a stable and placed in a makeshift cradle. Shortly after the Magi visit bearing their extravagant gifts, the family is forced to flee with their young child and seek asylum in Egypt to evade Herod’s execution order for all young boys. Darkness and light are woven together in the nativity story.

And for us having just lived through 2020 and the characters who experienced first-hand the events of the 1st century nativity, the question of God’s plan hangs over it all. Where is God in the darkness? How do we find God’s light? What direction do we take? What are we looking for? What does it all mean?

In the darkness of 2020 and uncertainty of 2021 do we believe that God’s light still shines and leads?

I’m going to use the Journey of the Magi to offer you some pointers in all your deliberations and journeys that you seek to undertake this year.

First of all the Magi set out to follow a star: they were seekers after truth, after God, after purpose and meaning.

God is found in the moments of wonder that make us stop and ponder the mystery.

What have been our own ‘awakening moments’ of wonder that have led us deeper into mystery?

The magi followed a star. What have been our ‘awakening moments’ of wonder that have led us deeper into mystery.

A new study from YouGov indicates that those in their late teens and early twenties (Generation Z) are more likely to believe in God than millennials in their late twenties and thirties. The study pointed to the ease at which young people can access information about faith online as a key reason for shifting the trend away from younger people being seen as less religious.

Other factors include less "stigma" about religious beliefs amongst Gen Z peer groups, leading to more open discussions about faith. Experts also believe that the pandemic may have caused many young people to think more seriously about what they believe, leading to an increase in religious affiliation.

The number of those in the 16 to 24-year-old age group who class themselves as religious rose to 23 per cent in the latest study. When the question was asked of 18 to 24-year-olds in January, the figure was at 21 per cent. For 40 to 59-year-olds and 25 to 39-year-olds, it fell to 26 per cent and 19 per cent respectively.

Dr Lois Lee, a fellow of the University of Kent’s department of religious studies, told the Times that it was "highly likely the pandemic has impacted on people’s existential beliefs and practices" but that she was "not yet convinced it will have made any group more or less religious in the longer term".

She noted that times of crisis can be “a time of exploration” in terms of personal belief systems. “Possibly this year’s data indicate that young people are going through that kind of exploratory period more than others," she said.

May their wonderings, and the wonderings of others who we know, lead them to the light of Christ.

Secondly, the star’s light was seen in the darkness; in their darker moments they trusted that the light was still to be found.

How have we experienced the dark? Where and how did we recognise the light.

Sometimes at the darkest moments in our lives we find the light that keeps us going. It may be expressed through the love and concern of others, it may be a word from scripture, and it may be a deep truth reinforced.

This Christmas as a church we distributed nearly 40 food parcels to families on Christmas Eve, thanks to the Fairshare scheme where we receive surplus food from M&S. Churches Together worked with GL11 to deliver over 100 Christmas dinners. Thanks to our Covid 19 Relief fund I was able to give out nearly £800 in small cash grants to families we know from our personal contacts and contacts with local schools who have been struggling. Some of the messages of appreciation were very moving:

*Dear Simon and all at Dursley Tab*

*I cannot express enough gratitude for the help and support you have shown to us.*

*You have given us strength, courage and hope in a very dark bleak time. My faith in human beings has been restored and in times like these the good is what keeps us all going.*

*I came home yesterday to find your beautiful card and totally unexpected money inside. Your act of kindness has touched us deeply.*

*All of your help has been a lifeline to us but more importantly it has made us feel valued and extremely lucky that in dark times there are wonderful human beings like yourself.*

*Merry Christmas and a happy new year to you all you have made a tremendous difference to us and helped more than you will ever know.*

 *Hi. I just want to say a huge thank you for your gift, you really have no idea what it means and how much it will help.  I had a few tears when I opened it and it means a lot just to know that people care and are there if needed. Thank you again for your generosity. Please pass on my thanks to everyone at The Tabernacle and I wish you all a merry Christmas*

Hopefully we have given some light in people’s darkness this Christmas time and may that continue into the new year.

Just a few days ago I climbed Downham hill near Uley. It was the first time in 20 years of being in Dursley that I’ve actually climbed up it. Due to the physical nature of the hill it lent itself to being a [Smallpox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smallpox) isolation hospital during the 18th and 19th century, making it one of the earliest isolation hospitals in the country. It is believed that the hospital played a roll in [Edward Jenner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Jenner)’s studies of the disease, and aided his eventual discovery of the Smallpox vaccine. I couldn’t help contemplate the role scientists have played in giving us hope for a vaccine against Covid 19 and our hopes for light at the end of this dark tunnel.

Thirdly the Magi asked questions when they were lost;

Continuing to try and make sense of where they were and where they were being led, they looked for help.

What are the questions we live with? Who are the wisdom figures for us? Who has helped us with our questions? Those people are always going to be invaluable for your journey. They may not give you the answers you are looking for, they may challenge and provoke. If they do – then even more reason to seek their wise counsel – who wants to be told what they know already?

Fourthly the Magi travelled together; we don’t know how many of them, (the Bible doesn’t specify that there were Three Wise men) but we can imagine the little community that they became as they travelled together, sharing this experience. Where do we experience community? What does this add to our journeying?

Being part of a church community can offer that friendship and support. I said that this year I have seen the value of belonging to a church even more starkly: Being part of a church means you are not alone. Together we have done great things during this pandemic. We have been able to help, encourage, support one another, and combine our gifts and talents to also support our community and think of others struggling in the world. Even though we have hardly had the chance to physically meet together, more than ever we have appreciated each other and depended on each other.

We pray God’s blessing on this community as we set out on an important year for us.

Fifthly the Magi met King Herod on the way. For his own reasons of power and control he tried to deceive them. We need to recognise the twisted value systems of our world and not get caught up in them or be misled by them. In what ways are we most often pulled off course?

The magi went to Jerusalem expecting the King to be found there in the wealth and power of the capital city. Yet they were to be told to find the new born king in the unassuming surroundings of Bethlehem, a little village nine miles south. The way of Christ would not be through wealth and power, control and fear but through love, forgiveness, justice and mercy. We can get caught up in the twisted value systems of our world and lose sight of who we are following. In what ways are we pulled off course?

Mario Russo and Jonty Langley write that a Covid-19 vaccine may bring the gift of immunity and a lifting of restrictions, but it will not rescue us from the many social injustices and communal sins that seemed inevitable or before this virus.[[2]](#endnote-2) The world still needs a spiritual awakening. Christians, now more than ever, should be loudly proclaiming that a better way is possible – because this is one of those rare moments in history when moving to a better way is a practical possibility.

The Corona crisis proved to us that things we took for granted can in fact change. Renters were protected from eviction. Workers were saved from unemployment for a while by furlough schemes. All of society showed that it was willing to sacrifice comfort and convenience for the sake of protecting the most vulnerable. In our haste to go back to ‘normal’ – to go to concerts and sporting events, to shop when and where we want to, and even to join physically to worship – we should not rush back into collective sin.

Let’s not go back to a world where work-life balance is sacrificed to the idol of productivity. Let’s use the advances in remote and flexible working that lockdown proved were possible to entrench a culture that values family at least as much as profit.

Let’s not go back to a world where markets rule over us – so many economic ‘laws’ have been suspended during lockdown that they have been proven to be a choice, not laws at all. We’ve seen our own government do wonderful things like the furlough system, mortgage holidays and eviction amnesties. We’ve seen that we *can* find extra money to help people (and not just for wars), so let’s keep doing that. Let’s have Christians calling for a war on poverty and suffering, setting aside fake ‘laws’ imposed by markets because we now know that in an emergency they can be set aside. And when one child in a country as rich as this goes hungry, when one mum who works two jobs still can’t afford heating and rent – an emergency is what it is.

Let’s confront our own sins of indifference, selfishness and pride. Let’s keep pushing our government to give foreign aid in the Jesus way of helping – without strings attached, aimed only at helping the poor. Let’s donate our time and wealth to charities making a difference. Let’s pay taxes willingly and let’s push for them to be used to help everyone – not just those we judge to be ‘deserving’. Let’s stop seeing some human beings as less than images of the living God – be they immigrants, heretics, addicts, liberals, sinners, Muslims, conservatives or children. And let’s work towards a world that treats them with the love God wants lavished on them.

Let’s push to go back to everything that was good about the world pre-Covid when it’s safe to do so. A world where we hug and gather *en masse* and move away from our screens more. But if the world we return to is as unjust as it was before, Christians will have failed to be Christ’s hands and feet.

A Covid-19 vaccine may save us from physical disease, but it won’t change what the pandemic revealed about our world’s spiritual state. Our inherent condition to rebel against truth, justice and mercy, and to propagate rather than fight injustice, is not the result of a virus, but a sinful condition — the only remedy for which is Jesus Christ. Fortunately, his remedy for our sin was provided a long time ago. The magi realized that and so…

Sixthly, they bowed down in adoration. Falling on their knees they worshipped the King – a moment beyond intellectual understanding, and of recognition. We can imagine that moment of knowing in the deep silence. This was the saviour. The one who would change hearts, minds, lives and turn people back to God. And so ….

Seventhly they offered their gifts. To be in the presence demanded a response, an offering – of themselves and of their gifts. Identify your own gifts. What are you offering of yourself, your time and your material possessions? We have all been given gifts of one sort or another. If we are not using those gifts – what a waste – and at a deep level a part of us remains unfulfilled. Where can we express those gifts and so be the person God calls us to be?

Finally, in a dream they were shown the truth: because of the danger, they were warned to return by a different way.

Revelation can come to us through our dreams. Have we ever experienced this? How else do we experience God’s revealing of the way to us? Be open to your dreams – what lies on your heart – it may mean another route – it may be dangerous – it may be uncomfortable. The important thing is always to find the courage to follow God’s leading – that way you are in the company of angels!

For prayerful pondering:

Name and give thanks for a moment of wonder.

Name some aspect of darkness and pray for light.

Name the questions that we still have

Name a companion on the journey and give thanks for their support.

Be aware of being pulled off course – going in a way that is not of Christ.

Be open for those moments of knowing and recognition.

Resolve to offer your gift this year in a particular way

Don’t be afraid to dream dreams.

**HYMN: As with gladness men of old**

**Intercessions for 3 January 2021**

Lord of all our journeys,
we pray for those searching for warmth and safety,
for those fleeing persecution and violence,
for those in temporary accommodation because their homes have been flooded or damaged –
remembering particularly those affected by Storm Bella and by the earthquake in Croatia.
Jesus child of the crib;
**bless them with the gifts of hope and courage
and may they find security in you.**

Lord of all our ups and downs,
we pray for those searching for peace of mind,
for those struggling with depression, eating disorders, addictions…and for their families,
for those facing the new year with sadness of heart, or little sense of purpose,
for those who face it alone.

Jesus child of the crib;
**bless them with the gifts of hope and courage
and may they find comfort in you.**

Lord of all wisdom,
we pray for those searching for clarity and stability,
for businesses adapting to new trade agreements.,
for farmers and fishermen,
for teachers and students amid uncertain term times and new ways of learning,
for those in industries unsure when they can re-open and struggling with new regulations,
for scientists challenged by new variants of the Covid-19 virus,
for those desperate to see their families again.
Jesus child of the crib;
**bless them with the gifts of hope and courage
and may they find reassurance in you.**

Lord of love,
we pray for those searching for work,
for those whose work is exhausting –
remembering especially those in the NHS and the emergency services,
for carers and those administering the new vaccines and for those who will receive it ,
for those searching for ways to feed their families and pay their bills,
and for those charities and organisations trying to help them.
Jesus child of the crib;
**bless them with the gifts of hope and courage
and may they find strength in you.**

Lord of us all ,
we pray for those searching for faith amid anxiety and loss,
for your church as she reaches out to those who are isolated, grieving, or battling with big questions,
and we pray for one another as we seek to offer our time and resources to our communities and those most in need.
Jesus child of the crib;
**bless us all with the gifts of hope and courage
and may we find peace in you.
Amen.**

**We come to share in this bread and wine – at the start of this new year: symbols that you are with us, we are not alone and we do not go into this new year alone.**

**God you came among us in the vulnerability of a baby. Come among us in our vulnerability at this moment in time. Be our light in our darkness. Sustain us, strengthen us, guide us. Make us one with your people past present and future. That as we share in this bread and wine we do so as your body here on earth. Break open our compassion and mercy, fill us with your Spirit, send us out in the name of Christ.**

**Let us eat and drink in his name.**

**Covenant Prayer**

**I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'**

**HYMN: Brightest and best**

**Sending out prayer**

Lord, as we continue our journey with you this week,
as we seek to live out our faith every day,
be with us, surprise with your love,
guide us by the light of Christ.

1. *Fiona Dorman is Education Officer at Bristol Cathedral.* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/111-january-february-2021-b/epiphany/the-week-in-focus*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/111-january-february-2021-b/epiphany/the-week-in-focus) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. **Mario A. Russo is the director of *The Dortmund Center for Science and Faith*. He holds degrees in both the sciences and theology. He also actively works as a church planter with his wife and two children in in Dortmund, Germany. Follow him on Twitter:**[**@Mario\_A\_Russo**](http://twitter.com/Mario_A_Russo)**. Jonty Langley is a writer, former DJ and recovering Philosophy major. By day he works at a Christian mission agency, by night he argues with people on the internet. He also hosts the newly launched *Beer Christianity podcast*. Find it on Twitter:**[**@beerxianity**](http://twitter.com/beerxianity) <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Why-the-Covid-19-vaccine-won-t-save-us> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)