

READING: Ephesians 3.1-12

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 2.1-12

Alleluia.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Alleluia.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

Epiphany 2025 - Encountering God

This morning, on the Feast of the Epiphany, I want to explore with you the idea of encountering God.

For those wise men who traversed afar I wonder if they knew they were encountering God as they went into that house and saw Mary with the Baby. They expected a King, a ruler, but did they expect the Son of God? Did they realise that in that small child, in that ordinary house, the infinite reality that is God had found finite form? They had set off from somewhere east of Bethlehem, not quite knowing where they were going, not quite knowing where to look. They used their intelligence and their experience to guide them, but ended up in the wrong place and needing to do quite a lot of rethinking to finally encounter the Christ child.

I have no doubt that the shepherds knew what was going on. There could have been no question that they were encountering God – for goodness sake you're up to your elbows pulling lambs out of the back ends of ewes up on a hillside, and the next moment you're getting blasted with the full panoply of the heavenly host, angels, harps, trumpets and the breath taking, brain exploding wonder making glory of God spread across their entire field of vision, motivating them to abandon those sheep and scurry off to Bethlehem to see that thing that had come to pass.

Two very different encounters with God. The shepherds completely overwhelmed by some spiritual experience heads

up, the wise men searching diligently, looking, wondering, questioning, heads down.

Both encounter God.

We are at that tipping point in the year when 2024 is behind us and 2025 stretches ahead – as we look towards the new year perhaps it is no bad thing to pause and consider how, where, and when we might encounter God ourselves. Last week, if you were here, you would have joined Fr Wayne and me at the confession as we recognised that wise men followed the star to find Jesus the King, and we asked forgiveness for our reluctance to do the same. It would not be a bad new year's resolution to take that confession and turn it into a resolution to look for encounters with God in the coming 12 months.

So, how might we encounter God? Where might we find him? To properly unwrap the question we have the three Kings to inspire us and so to answer the question, how do we find God, I am going to suggest some in a taxi, some in a car, some on a scooter honking your hooter, following yonder star. Oh! Oh!

The wise men of Matthew's Gospel weren't sure what they were looking for or who they might encounter. Quite logically they went looking in a capital city, a royal palace, the seat of political and economic power. Wrong!

They started looking in completely the wrong place but they kept looking, and eventually their curiosity, their questions, their search found fulfilment in the moment they saw the child they knew had been foreordained. They find him in an ordinary house, a working-class home, but when they see him in this very ordinary domestic setting they know they have found the one that the star had predicted. Pots, pans, the smell of cooking, animals, laundry, hustle bustle and business. This is where they encounter God; not where they expected, worthy of their worship, and it changed their future plans for the return journey.

Compare and contrast them with the shepherds – totally immersed in the natural world, under vast starlit skies, on wild bare hillsides, perhaps with the miracle of new lambs coming into the world. That is where they encounter God.

If we think about other Biblical characters we can see that for each one of them their encounter with God was as individual as they were. Let's try a few:

Elijah the prophet having faced down the prophets of Baal and seen God produce enough fire to consume a completely sodden altar, runs away in fear, hides in a cave, is confronted with earthquakes, hurricanes and fire but finds God in a small still voice of calm. He encounters God in a whisper.

Moses encounters God in a riddle – by a bush, in the desert, a bush that burns but is not consumed by the fire. Moses asks God who it is he is encountering – and God answers in

untranslatable Hebrew – often rendered as ‘I am who I am’, or it could be ‘I will be who I will be’ and I would translate it much more freely as God saying ‘that’s for me to know and for you to find out!’

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told of a eunuch from Ethiopia who encounters God while reading scripture in the back of a horse drawn cart alongside the apostle Philip. And that reminds me of the author CS Lewis who writes about encountering God on the top deck of a double-decker bus, and of his fuller Christian conversion while riding on a motorbike to Whipsnade Zoo.

Do you remember Mthr Kirstine preaching earlier in the year and starting her sermon with the unexpected sentence ‘I saw Jesus outside Bistro 66 last week’.

God can be encountered in as many different ways as there are people here this morning seeking to encounter God, looking for him.

I hope that when we come together to share in the eucharist what we do with the music and the liturgy somehow facilitates your encounter with God.

People often talk about encountering God in a holy building like this one.

Lighting a candle, staring at light shining through stained-glass, sitting still, reading scripture, all these might enable that encounter.

Meeting with one another and being enriched by our friendship.

Taking the body and blood of our Lord into your hands.

Watching a child skip down the High Road, hearing a robin drill into your ear with its piercing song, spotting the first shoots of spring bulbs.

God can be encountered in as many different ways as there are people here this morning seeking to encounter God, looking for him. There are those who will tell you that theirs is the only way to encounter the one true God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are wrong.

Professor Keith Ward in his book, *Love is His Meaning*, has helped me clarify my thinking on this. He states quite categorically that each one of us will encounter God in a very personal way, we will form a very individual portrait of Jesus from our reading of the Gospels, and our encounter with God will be uniquely our own.

We're at the start of a New Year – full of possibilities – pregnant with opportunity – and for us as Christians we can use this first week to renew our willingness to encounter God

– don't let's get to Epiphany 2026 and regret having missed opportunities to encounter God.