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EPIPHANY SUNDAY B

7th January 2024

A short act of worship and daily devotions

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Opening prayer

Visiting, travelling, God of migration,
As I begin my journey through 2024,
And celebrate the journey of the Magi to meet the Christ-child,
I ask that you will travel with me,
Today and every day.
Show me, show this whole world, the starlight of your grace, I pray, Amen.

You may now wish to say the Lord's Prayer in a version or translation with which you are familiar.

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12 – [Click for reading](#)

Responding to the reading

Today's reflection comes from David Hardman, the Methodist Liaison Officer in Jerusalem, part of the Methodist Church in Britain's Connexional Team and a mission partner on behalf of the Church. This reflection was originally written for The Vine resources, and this is a slightly abridged version, but we felt it was worth sharing so that people can hear some of David's thoughts and challenge for us in the midst of conflict in the Middle East.

Today to arrive in Bethlehem you have to navigate a checkpoint. The birthplace of Jesus is occupied, as it was when Jesus was born, not by the Roman Empire but by Israel. Across the West Bank, of which Bethlehem is a part, there are numerous checkpoints set up by Israel to control and restrict the movement of Palestinians. The security barrier which in most parts is a 30ft high concrete wall runs for 450 miles across the occupied West Bank and was built by Israel for security reasons, it has been deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice. If the Magi were searching for Jesus today, they would encounter this wall and would have to find a checkpoint to continue their journey.

You may well have seen the cartoons of the wise men on their camels scratching their heads as they look at the wall and try to figure out how they might complete the final leg of their journey! In fact, I have a nativity set from the West Bank in beautiful olive wood that includes a wall. Each year I set up my nativity and place the Magi on the outside of the wall! Each year I pray that the next time I set up my nativity I will not use the wall because it will have been dismantled and that Palestinians will be enjoying their human rights and political self-determination.

As symbolic as it is to draw or place the Magi on one side of the wall and the traditional nativity scene on the other, there is a question as to whether it would actually happen? The truth is in my role as the Methodist Liaison Officer in Jerusalem I can travel much more freely than my Palestinian friends and colleagues, simply because of my UK passport. I suspect that the wise men, in all their finery and obvious wealth, would have had little or no trouble getting through a checkpoint! Privilege opens checkpoints as well as doors.

It certainly opened royal doors for the Magi arrive as they seek an audience with King Herod. Following a star they had observed in the East they are looking for the child 'born king of the Jews'. The Palace seems an obvious place to start but Herod is unaware and has to enquire as to where such a child would be born before he sends the Magi off on the final leg of their journey to Bethlehem. If you are searching for a royal baby then it seems

wise to visit a King but as with so much of the nativity story, and in fact the life of Jesus, we see the conventions of the world turned upside down. Jesus, born to be king, is found in an ordinary home.

The Magi soon learnt, after being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they return home by another road. They have gone on a real journey, not just a physical but a spiritual one too. After witnessing the rising of the star in the east and visiting the halls power they realise that Jesus' birth ushers in God's kingdom in which the powerful predator lies down with the prey in peace (Isaiah 11).

As a theologian friend of mine says: in God's kingdom the lion becomes a vegetarian! It is the powerful and the privileged who give up their power and are 'brought down' just as 'the lowly are lifted up'. Authority in God's kingdom is not in the hands of rulers, the rich and those in positions of power, it is in the hands of the young unmarried pregnant mother, the bunch of misfits called to be disciples and in Jesus, a nomadic preacher.

As followers of Christ and citizens of God's kingdom we too are invited to go on this journey. A journey that leads from always trusting those with power in this world to recognising that we look to God in Jesus for our inspiration and our guidance.

The Magi assumed, wrongly, that Christ would be born to the political King, they found him in the little town of Bethlehem. Yet, their journey took them home on a different road, a road that led them away from the places of power. A road that led them to a different understanding of Kingship. A road that allowed them a glimpse of how God's kingdom differs from the human power structures that elevate the wealthy, the privileged and the self-serving to positions of authority and influence.

As we start this New Year, it's a perfect time to challenge ourselves again in our discipleship. Are we prepared to journey on another road and confess that too often we have listen to the voices of this world over and above the voice of God? If so we pledge ourselves to listen to God's voice and to live as 'fully signed up' citizens of God's kingdom.

Questions for personal reflection or for you to find time to discuss with a neighbour and/or friend this week:

- Can you see ways in your own life how God's love has turned your world upside down, made you think about your attitudes and change them?
- How best can we as Christians challenge those in authority and let God's voice speak through us?¹

Hymn:

611 STF – Brother, sister, let me serve you – [YouTube](#)

Love Shone Down – [YouTube](#)

Responding in prayer

The worldly wise found you, incarnate God, away from the corridors of power and in the loving arms of a young mum. Hear us now, as we pray for the world you created and the people you lived among.

In the stillness, we pray for all those who exercise power and influence...

[Silence]

May they work tirelessly for justice and peace.

¹ Reflection written by David Harman

We pray for those who have lost loved ones, homes and livelihoods in conflicts across the world...

[Silence]

May they know your eternal love surrounding them.

We pray for those who are desperately searching for sanctuary...

[Silence]

May they find an unconditional welcome.

We pray for creation as it groans under weight of our greed...

[Silence]

May we give up our domination of this planet and work with creation for renewal.

We pray for those we know and love (and those we ought to love) who are in need of prayer today...

[Silence]

May they know your love, and ours, in their difficult time.

In the name of the son of a teenage girl, we pray to the incarnate deity that God's kingdom may come,
God's will be done, Amen.²

Blessing

As you go from this place, go with the Spirit of the God of the Magi in your hearts,
Go inspired to share the blessings of the Christmas season and the love you have encountered at the manger-side.

Amen.

Prayers and Prayer Pointers for the Week Ahead

Monday 8th January

- The German theologian Meister Eckhart once said, 'if the only prayer you ever say in your life is "thank you", that will be enough'.
- Today, throughout the day (or whatever is left of the day), simply look for opportunities to pray the words 'thank you' to God.
- Thank you for the sunrise. Thank you for that I have enough food for the day. Thank you for my health, such as it is. Thank you for that lovely conversation with a friend. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.

² Prayers of intercession written by David Harman

Tuesday 9th January

- Pray for people affected by homelessness, those who are rough sleeping on the streets, but also the 'hidden majority' of homeless people who are sofa-surfing or in unstable housing situations.
- Pray for organisations working to support people with their housing, perhaps you are aware of some that are working locally to you.
- As you pray, listen for any promptings or invitation from God for you to do something in response. Are you able to make a donation, to volunteer sometime, to sign up to support a campaign on better housing policies in the UK?

Wednesday 10th January

- On this day in 1946, the first General Assembly of the United Nations met, at Methodist Central Hall Westminster, and began one of its' first major tasks – to rebuild peace after World War II.
- As we give thanks for the work of the UN, and all organisations committed to practicing peace in the world, let us also pray for renewed commitment amongst us all, that we might all play our part in seeking peace and pursuing it (Psalm 34:14).

Thursday 11th January

- Look up a hymn or worship song on YouTube and sit and listen: don't do anything else while you listen.
- Let your mind, body and soul tune into God through the music in prayer.

Friday 12th January

- Light a candle. Jesus is the light of the world. Pray about the places you experience darkness in your life, that Jesus light might shine there.

Saturday 13th January

- Time to get creative. Today, if you can, why not make a prayer mosaic? You could take strips of tissue paper, bits of recyclable rubbish, the newspapers from the week that have piled up in the front room, or anything you like...and tear out strips or pieces in different colours and stick them to a piece of paper.
- You might like to make a particular pattern or shape – a cross, a representation of the earth, some praying hands if you feel particularly creative...or you might like to just enjoy the process. Tearing and sticking. Cutting and sticking. Arranging.
- As you make your mosaic, think about the week just gone. Pray for the people you have met. Pray for the news stories that have stuck with you. Offer prayers for those on your heart today.