



# The Epiphany – Hope for all humankind

The twelfth day of Christmas marks the formal end of the Christmas season, when we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. This focuses on the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus, recorded in Matthew's gospel.

Jane Williams, in her book *Approaching Christmas*, explains that the shepherds (Luke's gospel) and the magi (Matthew's gospel) were not together at the scene of the nativity. Though Matthew doesn't specify the timing, contemporary understanding is that the magi came after the birth of Jesus, needing to follow a star 'from the East' and presumably journey some distance through desert lands. This is important for our understanding of the significance of the Epiphany as a feast. Matthew's account highlights that these 'wise men from the East' were gentiles – not the Jews who had been promised a Messiah. **On the feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the dawning realization that the infant Jesus was the Messiah for all humankind**, not just the Chosen People. Jane writes:

When our children were very small, an aunt knitted them a nativity scene, complete with the Holy Family, shepherds, sheep, cattle and wise men bearing gifts. It was a work of art, and it still comes out every Christmas. As it was knitted, it could safely be played with by little hands and was easily mended if any accidents befell it. A neighbour's dog came visiting one year and was much taken with one of the wise men; although the present he is carrying is now an odd sort of shape, there were no other lasting ill effects. **At the start of December every year, the wise men begin their journey from some distance away from the stable**, and the little knitted baby is kept somewhere safe until after the service on Christmas Eve.

The temptation, of course, is to allow the wise men to arrive in time to witness the birth of the baby. Most cribs that you see do have shepherds and wise men together in adoration. But in fact, **the wise men should only arrive after the shepherds are long gone** to feed their hungry sheep, and just before the Christmas decorations come down. **The wise men are the last on the scene. They have come a long way**, and they have taken one or two wrong turns, but they make it in the end.

Pp. 116-117.

No wonder the wise men 'were overwhelmed with joy' and 'knelt down and paid him homage'. And no wonder they presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They had realized that they were part of what was happening – this baby 'who has been born king of the Jews', even though they were not Jews, was including them.



Pope Francis, during his [2023 homily](#) on the Epiphany, shared a new perspective on the magi. He explained that, while they are best known for the gifts that they presented to the infant Jesus, more importantly, they also received gifts:

- The gift of **call** – God calling them.
- The gift of **discernment** – being able to ignore Herod and choose God's way.
- The gift of **surprise** – meeting God in a humble manger.

