

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022

Alternative service

A piece of dark blue cloth is hung, or a large piece of dark blue paper to evoke the night sky, on which a large star is placed. Paper stars are made available for the worshippers, who are invited to come forward and add their stars to the cloth. (Yellow star sticky notes are available widely.)

Introduction and welcome to worship

Today our prayer inspiration comes from the churches in the Middle East – that part of the Body of Christ geographically linked to the story of the coming of the Magi. The Magi reveal to us a unity of nations as desired by God. They travel from far-off countries and from different cultures, driven by the same hunger to see and know the new born king. This leads them to gather in the little house in Bethlehem for the simple act of giving homage and offering gifts. In our own multi-cultural society we can see some expressions of that rich variety.

At this time of year, some of us may feel we have moved on in our worship from the crib and the story of the coming of the Magi from the East. But our sisters and brothers in the Middle East invite us to focus on this story anew. Uniting with them and journeying again with the Magi, may our time together allow us to come face-to-face with our God in Christ. May our worship bring a sense of joy and wonder and allow us to respond as we go on further in our own journey of faith.

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and joy.

Hymn: Lord of the Church

Leader: During this service we'll be listening to the words of Matthew 2:1-12.
Let's pay attention to the beginning of that story:

Reader: Matthew 2, verses 1 and 2

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."

Leader: The Magi saw the star and were so moved by its appearing that they left everything and crossed the world to follow it, to find the child to whom the star pointed.

In our own lives, God invites us, too, to follow. When you arrived, you were given a paper star. Hold it now. As we hold our stars, let's take time to remember our own personal journeys towards Jesus, towards discipleship. Perhaps there was an event or a person who in our lives inspired us, a moment when we, too, were moved to follow God's invitation. Some of us will notice more than one star, more than one invitation, all leading to a deeper relationship with Jesus. Let your paper star hold the memory of your particular guiding light. And if you can't identify a star, perhaps your paper one can hold your simple desire to come closer to God.

A different leader:

Glory be to you Father Almighty, for you have revealed yourself through your creation and invited all people to gather in your presence. We have seen the star of Jesus in our lives and have come to worship him just as the Magi did. We offer him ourselves today and we ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit among us.

As we pray today for the unity of the Church, may we and our communities also be lights that guide others to Jesus the Saviour.

All: **“Unite us as we come from every corner of our community to worship you, our heavenly king. Amen.”**

Reader: Matthew 2, verses 3 to 6:

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.”

Leader: The seekers have come so far guided by the splendour of the universe. But to find their final destination, they need the help of others and the guidance and insight of the Scriptures. They discover that God’s word “is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”. [*Psalm 119:105*]

All: **“Lord, we thank you
For those who have helped us on our journey
that led to you.**

**Lord, we worship you
For lighting our path through chaos and doubt
by your Holy Spirit.”**

Hymn: Brother, sister, let me serve you – Richard A M Gillard

Reader: Matthew 2, verses 7 and 8:

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.”

Leader: On our journey, at times we have to encounter people who do not have good intentions. The Magi were asked to meet with Herod in the secretive corridors of power. Herod wants only to protect his own interests and ultimately to destroy whatever he sees as threatening them. We too have to contend with voices and messages that pretend to respect the good, but end up being destructive.

All: **“Lord, we have damaged our common home
through endless consuming.
Like Herod, we seek to protect our palaces**

**rather than sharing the riches of human dignity.
Light our way
as together we seek the path to a better future for all.”**

*Instead of this prayer, a time of silence could be held, in which a Leader asks people to focus on
'damaged our common home through endless consuming'.*

Hymn: Lord Jesus Christ, your light

[*Jésus le Christ*] (Taizé)

Reader: Matthew 2: verses 9 to 10

When the wise men 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.

Another leader:

God our heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the gift of joy in our own lives and in the lives of all who know and love you. We pray that as we journey towards the goal of Christian unity, our lives together may give a luminous and joyful witness that leads others to know Christ.

All: **We praise God, united in joy.**

Reader: Matthew 2, verses 11 and 12

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.

Leader: They enter the little house and see face to face the one their hearts were seeking. They worship and, opening their treasures, offer their gifts. Having encountered the Saviour, the Magi return to their countries by a different way. Similarly, may the communion we share in our prayer together inspire us to return to our lives, our churches and our world by new ways, changed by meeting the Lord.

Time here for a sermon/homily if so wished or time for silence, stillness, with or without quiet music

Optional Intercessions:

With faith and confidence, we come in prayer, before God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

Reader 1: The Magi came from the East to pay homage and to offer gifts from their cultures and countries. We pray today for Christian communities throughout the world in their diversity of worship and tradition: Lord, preserve these treasures, particularly in areas where the presence and survival of the Church is threatened by violence and oppression.

All: **Lord hear our prayer**

Reader 2: The early years of the Lord's life were marked by massacres at the orders of the despot Herod. We pray for children living in places in the world where violence continues. Lord, inspire us to work without ceasing to defend the oppressed and include the marginalized.

All: **Lord hear our prayer**

Reader 3: After the visit of the Magi, the holy family had to flee and became refugees in the land of Egypt. We pray for all uprooted people: Equip us, Lord, to show hospitality to those

driven from their homes, and grant us the spirit of welcome to those looking for a safe haven.

All: **Lord hear our prayer**

Reader 1: The birth of Jesus was announced as good news for all humanity. We pray for our efforts to seek harmony and dialogue with other faiths: Lord, give us humility and patience to walk with others with respect.

All: **Lord hear our prayer**

Reader 2: The Magi returned to their home by a different way. Lord, help us to find new and creative ways to follow you and to witness to you so that the world may believe.

All: **Lord hear our prayer**

We now return to the star, now also symbolic of our own gifts to the Christ-child.

Leader: At the beginning of our service, we were invited to hold our star, to remember our own personal journey towards Jesus, towards discipleship, recalling an event or a person who has inspired us. Or we may have simply allowed the star to represent our desire to come closer to God.

Look again at your star and this time ask for grace and strength so that you may be an influence for good. Perhaps you may ask for the opportunity to be alongside someone in need, to be their support. Or you may simply re-affirm your desire to continue your journey of discipleship.

Pause, perhaps quiet music begins and the leader continues with the music in the background:

The Magi brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and willingly offered them to the Christ-child. God asks the same of you and me. Let your star become a symbol of what you have to offer, a symbol of who you are. Christ can use us all and give us the grace to be salt and light in our everyday lives, so when you are ready, please come forward to add your star to the sky.

Soft music continues until everyone is back in their place. The leader then invites everyone to stand and sing.

Hymn: We Three Kings

– John Henry Hopkins

Leader: As we open up the treasure of our giftedness and put it at the service of the Body of Christ, let us pray that God's Kingdom will come and God's will be done:

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours**

now and for ever. Amen.

Sending and Blessing

Leader: Go now and live as children of light.

All: **For the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

Leader: Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness.

All: **Let us wake from sleep and Christ will shine upon us.**

Leader: Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

All: **Amen. Thanks be to God.**

Concluding Hymn: Shine Jesus Shine

(Graham Kendrick)

At the last verse, invite the worshippers turn to look at the exit, where the doors have been opened so people can look out and remind themselves that we are to be lights in the darkness

[weather dependent!]

Appendix

FULL NRSV TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ '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.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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