



We usually have a month-long holiday each January but, because we had most of 2021 off, the choir will continue rehearsing and singing at services through January 2022. Hence this special Epiphany edition of our newsletter.

The January calendar has no 'special' engagements, except regular services from Sunday 9 January (we do have two Thursday rehearsals off after Christmas); of course each service we sing is special, but so far we have no extra scheduled appointments during the month.



Epiphany - what does it mean?

The word *epiphany* – from Greek: *επιφανεια*, *epi* = to, *phaneia* = show; hence *epiphaneia* = an appearance, and more generally these days, a sudden appearance.

Epiphany (capitalised) – the Christian festival celebrated on 6 January commemorating the meeting between Jesus Christ and the gentiles as represented by magi from the east.

Matthew's account of Epiphany

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1, 2)

When T. S. Eliot wrote his Epiphany poem, "Journey of the Magi," he quoted almost directly from a sermon preached by the English bishop, Lancelot Andrewes in 1622:

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in solsticio brumali, 'the very dead of winter.'

Andrewes was involved in the translation of the King James Bible, and had a gift for expressive language. Eliot, a great admirer of Andrewes' writing, altered the original only slightly to make the first lines of his poem:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.*

Richard T France, (1938-2012) MA BD PhD, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, was a New Testament scholar and Anglican cleric. His commentary on Matthew 2:1-12 follows:

Magi were astrologers, who played a prominent part in court life in many eastern states, as advisers to kings. Their insights were derived from sophisticated astrological observations combined with the sort of 'interpretations' which present-day horoscopes provide. By such calculations made in *the east* (probably Mesopotamia, modern Iraq) they had concluded that an important royal birth had taken place in Palestine, which called for a 'state visit'. Matthew clearly sees this as an acceptable Gentile response to genuine revelation, despite its dubious means.

The sharp contrast between these well-motivated foreigners and the unscrupulous jealousy of Herod, the official King of the Jews, foreshadows the response which official Judaism will make to Jesus, and the future welcome of Gentile believers into the true people of God.

In the whole episode, Matthew finds rich material for meditation on the fulfilment of Scripture.

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Herod the Great died in 4BC. This episode did not necessarily take place immediately after Jesus' birth, but within two years of it, so that Jesus' birth was probably not later than 6 BC. In his last few years, Herod's paranoid defence of his throne led him to execute many imagined claimants, including even three of his sons and his favourite wife. The elimination of the handful of male infants in the small village of Bethlehem was entirely in character.



December

The choir was back in full harness through December, including two funeral services, and the usual busy period leading up to Christmas with a very well-attended festival on Bannockburn Oval in wonderful weather, the Lessons and Carols service on the Sunday before Christmas, the Christmas Eve service and the Christmas Day service early on the following morning. And some of our number returned on Boxing Day to sing again at the 9 am service.

We mightn't have had the chance to sing Messiah this Christmas season, but we seemed to make up for that by singing one chorus on each Sunday through the month and three during the Carol service, and then the *Alleluia* chorus on Christmas morning.

It is always a privilege to participate in the funerals of long-standing parishioners. This month we sang for the families and friends of Gail Boyd and Judy Clements.

And we were represented at the pre-Christmas carol service at Wahroonga House when two of our number braved the lockdown, had the rapid test and were allowed in with Greg Olliffe, Chris Hollister and James Allington to lead the carols.

After choir practice on the Thursday before Christmas we had our chance to say 'Thank You' and 'Farewell' to Anne Apin who has managed the choir library seemingly forever. Just how long was it, Anne?

And at the same choir party, Pamela, our personal representative on the committee of the NSW Branch of the Royal School of Church Music, presented Louise Kearns with her certificate of achievement for the Voice for Life Bronze award. Hearty congratulations, Louise!

Instead of declaring a holiday for all of January, Phillip has given us just two Thursday rehearsals off. We are encouraged to sing in mufti from the choir pews each Sunday until 9 January when we shall sing our first anthem of 2022. At least, in the choir pews, we may sing without masks!



Salisbury

Following correspondence with Catherine Mitchell who manages the visiting choirs at Salisbury Cathedral, we have agreed to let our invitation to sing there in August 2022 lapse. We have asked that we be considered for a slot during the long Summer vacation in 2023. Catherine has advised that she has many local candidates ready to fill any gap we might have left in her schedule.

One of the reasons for stepping back was our inability to guarantee a balanced choir. Another reason was the pandemic situation in Europe which remains very uncertain. This gives us the opportunity to boost our chorister numbers, particularly with some younger voices.



The twelfth day of Christmas – 6 January – Epiphany

A partridge in a pear tree

Two turtle doves

Three calling birds

Four French hens

Five gold rings

Six geese a-laying

Seven swans a-swimming

Eight maids a-milking

Nine ladies dancing

Ten lords a-leaping

Eleven pipers piping

Twelve drummers drumming



The history of the carol is rather murky. The earliest known version appeared in a 1780 children’s book called *Mirth without Mischief*. (A first edition of that book sold for some \$25,000 at a Sotheby’s auction in 2014, but you can also order a facsimile copy on Amazon for \$28.38 with *The Twelve Days of Christmas; The play of the gaping-wide-mouthed-waddling-frog; ... and Nimble Ned’s alphabet and figures!*).

Some historians think the song could be French in origin, but most agree it was designed as a “memory and forfeits” game, in which singers tested their recall of the lyrics and had to award their opponents a “forfeit” if they made a mistake.

Many variations of the text have existed at various times. Some mention *bears a-baiting* or *ships a-sailing*; some name the singer’s mother as the gift giver instead of their true love. Early versions list four *colly* birds, an archaic term meaning black as coal (blackbirds, in other words). And some people theorize that the five gold rings actually refer to the markings of a ring-necked pheasant, which would align with the bird motif of the early verses.

In any case, the song most of us are familiar with today comes from an English composer named Frederic Austin; in 1909, he set the melody and lyrics (including changing *colly* to *calling*) and added as his own flourish the drawn-out cadence of *five go-old rings*.

A popular theory that has made the rounds is that the lyrics to *The 12 Days of Christmas* are coded references to Christianity, suggesting that the song was written to help Roman Catholics learn and pass on the tenets of their faith while avoiding persecution during the times of their repression in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The theory arose during the 20th century and has no basis in fact.

Hymns, psalms, songs

At a choir rehearsal during December, Phil asked “Why hymns, not songs?”

The word **hymn** came from the Greek word *ὕμνος* (pronounced very approximately “oomnos”). Interesting that we leave the “n” off while the Greeks never had the “h” sound in the first place. The “h” was added by the Romans and the “oo” became “i” when they also changed the vowel sound to make their word “*hymnus*”.

Whichever way the word was spelled or sounded, it was used to describe a song in praise of a god or hero. It was adopted by the translators of the Septuagint¹ in place of various Hebrew words to mean a “song in praise of God.”

The word **psalm** came from the Greek word *Ψαλμοί* (say “psalmoy”). It refers to plucking with the fingers, sounding the harp, and in the Septuagint it was used for a song sung with harp accompaniment. It is the word applied to those poems recorded in the book of Psalms in the Old Testament and which were sung in the Jewish tabernacles of old.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives a host of origins of the word **song**, viz. “Old English *sang* (*song*), Old Frisian *sang*, *song*, Old Saxon, *sang* (Dutch *sang*), Old High German, *sanc* (German *sang*), Old Norse *songr*, Gothic *saggws*,” etc. The word seems to have emerged from Europe rather than from Greek or Latin roots.

So, in brief, all three are songs; but only *hymn* specifically points to a song in praise of our creator God.



We three kings of Orient are – common epiphany misconceptions

Let us examine briefly what might be true and what might not be quite so true about the story of the three wise men.

1. Three: there might have been three, or two, or two dozen. The number is not recorded.
2. Kings: Matthew records ‘magi’, not kings (see **Matthew’s account of Epiphany** on page 1).
3. Orient: not from today’s “orient,” China, but from some distance away, certainly. Various authorities have suggested they arrived from Arabia or Mesopotamia, which are now represented on the map below as being the Arabian Peninsula (Arabia), plus Iraq and Kuwait (Mesopotamia).
4. Riding on camels: unlikely. Camels then and now were beasts of burden. Horses were the preferred mode of travel over long distances. They were faster, and much more comfortable!
5. Gold, frankincense, myrrh: Matthew clearly lists the gifts and his accuracy is not questioned.

- Gold was first mined in Arabia around 3,000 BC. Gold was directly associated with royalty. Evidence of a large mine from that era has been located in the Province of Al-Madinah (near Medina in the map below).
- Frankincense was regularly used in the ceremonial worship of a deity. *Boswellia sacra* is the primary tree in the genus *Boswellia* from which frankincense, a resinous dried sap, is harvested. It is native to the Arabian Peninsula (Oman, Yemen).
- Myrrh was used as a perfume, anointing oil, medicinal tonic, and as a key ingredient in the mixture of spices used to prepare bodies for burial. It is a gum resin obtained from the stem of *Commiphora molmol*, a tree that grows in north-east Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Men from other parts of the ‘east’ might have brought these gifts, but if they came from ‘Arabia’ they carried the best commodities from their own country to a neighbouring King.



¹ Septuagint was the original translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek.

6. Present at the birth: most unlikely. Luke describes Jesus' birth in detail and records the visit of the shepherds, but not of the magi. The magi's response to the news of the birth was to begin a long journey. Some writers have claimed that they might have taken up to two years to reach Bethlehem, by which time Jesus would have been well clear of the manger. It is interesting, nonetheless, that the family was still in Bethlehem when they arrived and had not returned home to Nazareth. Perhaps the magi arrived only weeks, or at the most a few months, after Jesus' birth and were not wandering aimlessly around in the desert for several years.

We might, therefore, retell the story of the 'Three wise men' as follows:

A posse (more than one) of astrological advisers to royalty in their own land deduced that someone very special had been born in another place. They used the night skies as their map to journey on horseback to Bethlehem where they presented to the young child the best gifts their land could offer. And then they returned home.

Notwithstanding all of the, no doubt well-meant, embellishments to the original story, the important thing is that the magi came. The visit was particularly important to Matthew, and should also be to us, because Gentiles as well as Jews were involved in Jesus' very earliest times. Praise be to God!



Hyfrydol

The editor very gratefully acknowledges the contributions received from readers for this and past issues. Further contributions are always very thankfully accepted (preferably in Word format, but pdf is also very acceptable):

- Personal stories;
- Musical stories;
- Just about anything, really.

Send them to chideock@optusnet.com.au