

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022

We Saw His Star in the East...

18–25 January

Introduction

The story of the Magi visiting the Holy Family in Bethlehem is one very familiar to us. Indeed, we have recently celebrated Christmas; the Feast of Incarnation and Epiphany. The Magi have sometimes been seen as a symbol of the world's diversity – different religions and cultures – that comes to pay homage to the Christ-child. The story might therefore represent the unity of all created that God desires. The Magi travel from far-off countries, and represent diverse cultures, yet they are driven by the same hunger to see and know the new-born king and are gathered into the little house in Bethlehem in the simple act of giving homage. In this we can find a metaphor for Christian unity: that is, of different Christian peoples drawn together in their common search to recognise Christ, to know him and to worship him and witnessing to wider need for unity and to overcome injustice.

This text has been chosen by the churches of the Middle East, the history of which was, and still is, characterized by conflict and strife, tainted with blood and darkened by injustice and oppression. It was in the Middle East that the Word of God took root and bore fruit: thirty and sixty and one hundredfold. And it was from this East that the apostles set out to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

In this context Christians are called to seek the new-born king, the king of gentleness, peace and love. But where is the star that leads the way to him? It is the mission of the Church to be the star that lights the way to Christ who is the light of the world. By word and through action the Christian people are called to light the way so that Christ might be revealed, once again, to the nations. Yet divisions dim the light of Christian witness and obscure the way, preventing others from finding their way to Christ. Conversely, Christians united in their worship of Christ, and opening their treasures in an exchange of gifts, become a sign of the unity that God desires for all of creation.

After encountering the Saviour and worshipping him together, the Magi return to their countries by a different way, having been warned in a dream. The communion we share in our prayer together must inspire us to return to ourselves, our churches and our world by new ways. But what does this mean in practice? Serving the Gospel today requires a commitment to humankind, especially the poorest, the weakest and those marginalized. It requires from the churches transparency and accountability in dealing with the world, and with each other. This means churches need to cooperate to provide relief to the afflicted, to welcome the displaced, to relieve the burdened, and to build a just and honest society. This is a call for churches to work together so that we can all build a good future according to God's heart, a future in which all human beings can experience life, peace, justice, and love.

Order of Worship

It is recommended that a crib, featuring the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family be placed in a prominent place as a visual focus for the worship service

Opening

The coptic hymn “Our Lord Our Lord, came for us” is played whilst we gather our thoughts and prepare to worship God.

Call to Worship

Leader 1 In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Congregation Amen.

Leader 2 Brothers and sisters, we are united today with fellow believers throughout the world as we gather to pray for the visible unity of the Church. We do this with worship resources prepared by the Middle East Council of Churches. Our theme is inspired by the visit of the Magi to the new-born King, as described in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: “We observed his star in the East, and have come to pay him homage.” Let us fix our eyes on the star that was seen in the East and allow it to lead us too.

Leader 1 Let us come into God’s presence in solidarity with all who are sick, suffering, marginalized, displaced and oppressed, knowing that our darkness can be dispelled by God’s light. As we pray today for the unity of the Church, may we all journey together to meet Jesus the Saviour, the light of the world.

Leader 2 Glory be to you Father Almighty, for you have revealed yourself through your creation and invite 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.

**Congregation Unite us as we come to worship the king, all glorious above.
Amen.**

Hymn - *O Worship the King.*

Prayer of Praise and Confession

Leader 1 We glorify you, O Lord, creator of heaven and earth, for you have set the lights in the vault of the sky. You separated light from darkness and arranged signs to mark sacred times, and days and years. You

studded the firmament with stars. How majestic are your works, the heavens declare your glory and the skies proclaim the work of your hands!

Congregation We glorify you, O Lord.

Leader 2 We praise you for you did not abandon us despite our rebellion but sent your Son to brighten our darkness and be our light and our salvation. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humanity. And the light shines in the darkness.

Congregation We praise you, O Lord.

Leader 1 We worship you, O Lord, for you accompany us in the chaos of our life through the power of your Holy Spirit. You light up our paths and give us wisdom and faith in a world of untruth and doubt.

Congregation We worship you, O Lord.

Leader 2 We thank you, O Lord, for you send us into the world to witness to this light, in our various churches and diverse cultures, and to proclaim the Good News to Jesus, the one true King, offering ourselves to him.

Congregation We thank you, O Lord.

Leader 1 May all the peoples bow before you and worship you. We have often preferred darkness, but you have given us light. Therefore, we come to you confessing our sins and saying:

Congregation We confess that we have turned from your ways.

We have harmed your good creation through our greed.

We have polluted and poisoned the air, earth and waters, destroying habitats and species.

Leader 2 Lord have mercy

Congregation Christ have mercy

Congregation We have acted selfishly towards our brothers and sisters. We have put our own needs and desires above our commitment to justice. We have built walls between us and planted seeds of mistrust.

Leader 1 Lord have mercy

Congregation Christ have mercy

Congregation We have divided people based on ethnicity and culture, discriminating instead of celebrating difference. We have waged war, claiming Jesus for our side.

Leader 2 Lord have mercy

Congregation Christ have mercy

Congregation Forgive all these thoughts and deeds, O Lord, as we come before you in repentance.

Leader 1 Lord have mercy

Congregation Christ have mercy

Leader 2 Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom you have sent in the fullness of time to redeem all people, we ask you to have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and transform us into his glorious image so we can shine as a beacon of hope in our troubled world.

Leader 1 Lord have mercy

Congregation Christ have mercy

Leader 2 Almighty God hears our prayers, has mercy on us and forgives our sins.

Congregation Thanks be to God, whom we praise with all our voices.

Chant - *Trisagion*

Holy God!
Holy Mighty!
Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!

Psalm 8 (*responsively*)

Leader 3 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Congregation Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a safe place, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

Leader 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

Congregation What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Leader 3 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour.

Congregation **You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,**

Leader 3 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of
the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of
the seas.

Congregation **O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the
earth!**

Chant - *Tui Amoris Ignem*

First Reading - *Isaiah 9:2-7*

Chant - *Song of Light (Saint Ephrem)*

The Light of the just and joy of the upright is Christ Jesus our Lord.
Begotten of the Father, he manifested himself to us.
He came to rescue us from darkness
and to fill us with the radiance of his light.
Day is dawning upon us; the power of darkness is fading away.
From the true Light there arises for us
the light which illumines our darkened eyes.
His glory shines upon the world
and enlightens the very depths of the abyss.

Death is annihilated, night has vanished, and the gates of Sheol are broken.
Creatures lying in darkness from ancient times are clothed in light.
The dead arise from the dust and sing because they have a Saviour.
He brings salvation and grants us life.
He ascends to his Father on high.
He will return in glorious splendour
and shed his light on those gazing upon him.

Second Reading - *Ephesians 5:8-14*

Gospel Introduction - *Syriac Orthodox Hymn - Mshiho Ethiled*
(Christ was born in Bethlehem)

Gospel Reading - *Matthew 2:1-12*

Sermon

(The Gospel will be followed by a moment of silence for reflection)

Nicene Creed - *(according to the tradition of the Eastern Churches)*

Congregation

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.**

**For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.**

**On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified
who has spoken through the prophets.**

**We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

Sharing Christ's Light

A piece of dark blue cloth is hung to evoke the night sky, on which a large star is placed. Paper stars are added, you are invited to hold up your own stars and light a candle.

Leader 4

A star led the Magi to Christ. Today this star points to the presence of Christ, who has been revealed to us and whose light shines on us. As the Magi followed the star to Bethlehem, we gather under this star today, adding our own stars to the sky, uniting our own gifts and

prayers for the visible unity of the Church. As we journey towards that goal, may our lives together give a luminous witness that leads others to know Christ.

Prayers of Intercession

Leader 4 With faith and confidence, we come in prayer, before God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

Leader 3 The Magi came from the East to pay homage and offer special gifts from their cultures and countries. We pray today for all Christian communities around the world in their diversity of worship and tradition: Lord we ask you to preserve these treasures, particularly in areas of the world where the presence and survival of the Church is threatened by violence and oppression.

Congregation O, Lord, hear our prayer

Leader 4 The early years of the Lord's life were marked by violence and massacres at the orders of the despot Herod. We pray for children living in places in the world where violence continues and where its results are tangible. Strengthen, O Lord, the bonds of unity and mutual love among our churches and help us to cooperate and witness to your holy Name. Inspire us to work without ceasing in order to defend the oppressed and include the marginalized. Encourage us to stand together in the face of tyranny and oppressive regimes as we seek your Kingdom among us.

Congregation O, Lord, hear our prayer

Leader 3 After the visit of the Magi, the holy family experienced migration through the wilderness and became refugees in the land of Egypt. We pray for all the refugees and uprooted people in this world: 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.

Congregation O, Lord, hear our prayer

Leader 4 The birth of Jesus was good news for all, gathering people from different nations and religions in worship of the holy child. We pray for our efforts to seek harmony and dialogue with other religions: Lord, give us humility and patience to walk with others with respect on their journey.

Congregation O, Lord, hear our prayer

Leader 3 The Magi returned to their home by a different way.
We pray for our churches in this changing world:
Lord, help us to find new and creative ways to follow you and to witness
to you so that the world may believe.

Congregation O, Lord, hear our prayer

Leader 4 When the Magi saw the holy child, they rejoiced with great joy.
Heavenly Father, fix our eyes on him so we do not lose our way. Unite
us in the Lord Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and who has
taught us to pray, saying:

Congregation Our Father in heaven...

Hymn – *Lord the Light of your Love (Shine Jesus Shine)*

Sending and Blessing

Leader 1 Go now and live as children of light.

Congregation For the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Leader 2 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness.

Congregation Let us wake from sleep and Christ will shine upon us.

Leader 1 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.

Congregation Amen. Thanks be to God.

Parting Hymn – *We three Kings*

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