6 January 2018: Festal Eucharist with Incense
The Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1–6, Ephesians 3:1–12, Matthew 2:1–12
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In nomine…

What do the letters KMB mean to you? It’s a strange question, I know – KFC and GMB are familiar to us all; Dr Stephen Darlington, late of this cathedral, has recently discovered what MBE stands for! But KMB, I suspect, more of a mystery. If I asked the same question in Catholic Europe the answer would be very different. As an undergraduate I had the privilege of spending a year in Austria. I came home for Christmas, but getting back to the flat in Innsbruck in the new year, I found those letters - KMB - written in white chalk on the front door. At first I thought they must be graffiti or instructions for some building work, but then I noticed a date written underneath – the 6th January. And it wasn’t just our door that had KMB on it, but the doors of all the flats in the corridor. Later I found out from the neighbours what this all meant. K, M and B were the initials of Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, the three wise men. Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, I was told, had passed along my corridor on their way to visit the baby Jesus at the crib in the parish church. And, as they did so, the three Kings had been kind enough to leave these signs along their route to church, bringing God’s blessing on the people whose houses they passed.

That is just one of many legends and traditions that have grown up around today’s great feast of the Epiphany. None of them has any basis in the Bible. After all, as we heard in today’s gospel, the people who visit Jesus have no names and we’re not told they were kings. We don’t even know that there were three of them – we just guess that from the fact that they bring three presents! The Bible simply calls them magi, which probably means people skilled in reading and interpreting the night sky. Other than that we’re told very little. We know what their gifts were – gold and frankincense and myrrh – but we can’t be sure what those gifts mean. Our Epiphany hymns interpret them. Most concisely ‘Bethlehem of noblest cities’, whose fourth verse says:
Solemn things of mystic meaning: / Incense doth the God disclose, 
Gold a royal child proclaimeth, / Myrrh a future tomb foreshows.

But, lovely though it is, Prudentius’s hymn dates from four hundred years after Christ and we’ve no way of being certain that this is what the wise men’s gifts were meant to signify.

In fact, the most important thing we know about the wise men is that we know so little. The wise men are strangers, foreigners, people who have little or nothing to do with the Palestinian Jewish surroundings into which Jesus was born. We don’t know where they were from or where they were going.

But what we do know is that they have a place right at the heart of the story of our Christian faith. These strange, shadowy figures from the East, who make the long winter journey to Bethlehem, tell us that the birth of Jesus is also the birth of the Christ, the universal saviour. And they remind us that his gospel is good news for all times and places. The Christian gospel and the Church which proclaims it are catholic and universal – which is to say for all races and all cultures. The gospel is good news not just to the eastern Mediterranean of two thousand years ago, but to all people in all places. In the epiphany of Christ all things are made anew; and, as the apostle Paul puts it, ‘In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all in all’. (Colossians 3:11).

So the wise men remind us that the gospel is universal and catholic, but they have another thing to teach us too. Have you noticed a strange detail in the gospel story? Listen again to this verse: ‘When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy’. It isn’t the sight of the baby Jesus that makes the wise men joyful; it’s simply the fact that the star has stopped. Their trust in God is so great that they have followed the star from distant lands, and now know for certain that where it has stopped, there they will find ‘the child who has been born king of the Jews’. Their trust is in stark contrast to the fear and suspicion of King Herod. Herod sees the star and the birth it heralds as a threat, not a cause for joy. He makes out that he wants to go and pay homage to the new born boy, but in reality the only homage he intends to pay is that of violence and murder.

King Herod represents everything that is wrong and sinful in our human nature. His is the urge to control: to keep power for ourselves at the expense of others and their needs. The wise men, on the other hand, stand for all that is good in humanity: the desire to
seek and find God’s presence in the world; the desire to offer themselves and their gifts in worship of God and service of others.

Today’s feast of the Epiphany is literally the feast of ‘the manifestation’, ‘the showing forth’. It is the day on which God in Christ shows himself to the whole world, allowing everyone to see the truth and the goodness and the beauty of God in the form of a human child. ‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive’ – so said Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century. That is the truth of which the Epiphany reminds us. ‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive’. And we glorify God by being truly human, by being fully alive, by allowing the embrace of our compassion to be enlarged with the love of God.

I began with the letters KMB scrawled on an Austrian doorway. I’d like to end not in Austria, but in Israel. If you’ve ever been to the Holy Land you’ll know that in that part of the world, near to the equator, dawn and dusk barely exist. The sun rises in a moment and darkness is transformed into light almost instantly. That’s how we should understand Isaiah’s words from our first reading: ‘Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you’. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ the darkness of human sin – the darkness of Herod – has been scattered.

And the Epiphany – the manifestation – of Christ to the world should encourage all of us to rejoice in that new brightness. At the end of this service chalk will be blessed and distributed and we’re each invited to take it away and inscribe the wise men’s names as blessings on the doors of our own homes: in anglicized form they are CMB, allowing a double meaning: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar; but also Christus mansionem benedicat: Christ bless the home.

The light of God’s glory shines in the perfect humanity of Christ, a light for all ‘the nations, that [God’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth’ (Isaiah 49:6), but which starts by illuminating our homes and the lives we lead there. So let us pray for grace to know and to show that light in this House, in our own homes and in our world today, bringing to Christ the most precious gifts of all – our lives, dedicated to his worship and service.

Amen.