Epiphany has a longer history as a festival in the Christian year than does Christmas. In the Eastern church, a feast was kept on 6 January from at least the third century, in honour of the nativity, the revelation of the Christ child to the Magi, and the baptism of Christ; it was also believed that Christ performed the first miracle of his adult ministry at Cana on this same date. In the West, the celebration of the nativity as Christmas on 25 December began only in the mid-fourth century, and the festival of Epiphany was introduced at the same time, on the eastern date of 6 January; for western Christians this date marked the end of Christmas. Retaining the Greek name, meaning manifestation, the feast focused not on the baptism of Christ, but on the revelation of the infant Christ to the gentiles.

Other than signifying an occasion on which Christmas trees and decorations may be taken down (by those households that do not leave them in place until the fortieth day after the nativity and the feast of Candlemas), Epiphany can sometimes be a rather low-key festival in Britain. Yet, in other parts of the world, it is celebrated in grander style, with processions and special food. And also by the blessing and distribution of chalks to mark believers’ houses with symbols commemorating the visit of the Magi, a practice that is gradually spreading in this country. At the end of our festal eucharist this morning, the president will bless chalk for us to use to bless our own homes. Remembering the journey of the Magi who followed the star to find the Christ-child, the incarnate son of God, we will pray that God may be present in our homes and bless them as places of hospitality, where we may welcome strangers seeking Christ.

By performing this little ceremony not on the first day of the new calendar year, but on the feast of the Epiphany, the revelation of Christ to the gentiles, we remind ourselves again that part of the mystery of the Epiphany is the world-changing inclusion of gentiles
among God’s people. In our first reading, God promised to save the remnant of Israel from exile, gathering scattered Israel as a shepherd gathers his flock. But at Epiphany we learn that those who were drawn to the light that marked the coming of Christ into the world included people from outside Israel. Therefore, we understand that the promises of salvation to which Jesus would witness are made for all humanity, not just God’s first chosen people.

The events of Epiphany have inspired generations of Christians, fuelling the imagination of artists and poets. The adoration of the Magi is one of the most familiar images of western art, depicted on many of the Christmas cards we receive each season. The earliest known English representation occurs on the front panel of an eighth-century ivory casket, the Franks Casket, about which I preached in January last year as part of our series of sermons to coincide with the Ashmolean’s Imagining the Divine exhibition.

Three men, shown in profile, each bearing a gift, approach a seated woman with a child on her knee. In case we did not recognise them, the Magi are identified by the incised runic inscription reading magi, just to the left of the rosette-shaped star with thirteen spokes. The first wise man, kneeling, holds out a chalice filled with gold nuggets; the curious bird by his feet (is it a duck, is it a platypus?) probably represents the Holy Spirit. Behind him, the second man stoops with a chalice burning incense; the third stands a little taller holding a branch denoting myrrh, bowing his head reverently. The arrangement of the figures, descending in height from left to right, draws our eyes away
from the gifts each bears towards the infant Christ on his mother’s lap. Here is the light come into the world; God’s son sent not to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

As in all visual representations of the wise men, the three figures bear gifts. Gold, a symbol of wealth, carried by the first, kneeling figure, stands most obviously for kingship on earth, but it might also be construed as a mark of virtue; frankincense symbolises divinity, as incense was offered to, and burnt before gods. But myrrh, an embalming ointment, seems an odd gift for a new-born. It brings to mind Christ’s future suffering, his death and burial. We may recall the woman with the alabaster jar of myrrh who – to the manifest disapproval of the disciples – shattered the jar to pour the ointment over Jesus head, anointing his body in preparation for its burial (Mark 14: 3-9) Even at this moment of great joy and worship, of revelation of the Godhead to all humanity, we are brought face to face with the Passion.

There is another potential reference to Christ’s death in this image from the Franks Casket, but a subtler one that may not immediately be obvious. Seated on his mother’s lap, the incarnate Christ looks almost as if he is still inside Mary’s womb in a theologically-freighted image that stresses Mary’s role as theotokos, God-bearer, mother of God; her loving arms envelop and protect him, emphasising his human birth. The cloud-like halo around Christ almost makes him resemble a Eucharistic host, a perception that grows when we recognise that the round objects scattered on the ground in front of the seated Virgin are not snow fallen on the winter ground, but small discs of bread. Remember that Bethlehem means ‘house of Bread’: here we see the living bread that came down from heaven; the bread of life and salvation. But when we eat that bread, as the representation of Christ as a host reminds us, we do so in memory of the Last Supper and Christ’s commandment to take and eat in remembrance that he died for us. Incarnation and passion are fused in this image of the revelation of the Christ child to the gentiles.

We find a similar fusion in the statement at the start of our second reading: ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’. That short passage, in which John the Baptist recounted what happened when he baptised Christ in the Jordan, also had revelation at its heart: the revelation of Christ’s true nature, and a prophesy about his fate. In the narratives of the synoptic gospels, Christ’s baptism served to confirm his identity for the readers of each gospel. But in the fourth gospel, the episode had a different function, for it was John the Baptist who had the revelation, and it was he who
then recounted his new-found understanding as part of his own witness to the divinity of Christ. As John looked back and recalled the events of Jesus’ baptism, he twice observed that, before that time, he had not known who Jesus was: ‘I myself did not know him’, he said (vv 31 and 33). John needed God’s revelation in order correctly to identify Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit; only with that understanding could he testify ‘this is the Son of God’. Most significantly, his testimony would have the effect of causing others to turn to Jesus. On the following day, John would again identify Jesus, with the result that the two of his own disciples, who had been walking with him, would immediately turn to follow Christ instead. (John 1:35-7).

When John saw Jesus coming towards him, he proclaimed him ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’. Which lamb of God might John have meant? Since the early days of the church, commentators have debated whether John might have referred to the suffering servant lamb of Isaiah 53, the Passover lamb of the book of Exodus, the lamb sacrificed morning and evening in the Temple, or the triumphant lamb of the Apocalypse. Alternatively, some have wondered whether he could have meant to encompass all of these in pointing towards the expiatory death of Christ on the cross. For all that the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed would prove to be perfectly fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, the Son of God. (Morris, John, 148).

The decisive issue here is that John identified Jesus as the one who would break the dominating, destructive, corrosive power of sin for the whole world; instead of slavery to sin comes freedom, acceptance and belonging in the Son (cf John 8:34-6). But the price for that redemption, for our salvation, would come in Christ’s suffering and death. As a sacrificial lamb, he would take upon himself the collective burden of sin that weighs down humanity and make atoning sacrifice for our sins. And not for our sins only, but for those of the whole world. A whole world that – as the Magi were the first to understand – included gentiles not just the people of Israel.

How are we to respond to this, on this feast when in the western church we focus solely on the revelation to the Magi. What does the Epiphany mean for us? We are unlikely to meet three camels navigating between the buses on the Abingdon Road; nor is a bright star hanging over Tom Tower. Some of you may be lucky enough to have experienced a personal epiphany on your own journey toward God, for which you will rightly have offered heartfelt thanks and praise. But for many of us, the Christian journey can seem more like a groping towards something right and good, a journey involving many wrong turnings and detours, stumbles and backward steps. Yet we should acknowledge the
validity of our own personal experiences of seeking God, and not feel inadequate if we
take our own route differently, or more slowly than others. A wonderful mystery like the
biblical Epiphany can all too readily become distorted in the modern imagination to
become an oppressive symbol of how faith ought to happen. The revelation of the
Christ-child to the gentiles, the newly-baptised Christ to John the Baptist, the Lamb of
God to the disciples are all beacons for belief, not models or templates for how we come
to believe.

Even though you may have seen no heavenly vision, but are simply trying to do your
best, to do the right thing, to care for others and to love God in your own way, then you,
too, are making your own personal journey to the crib, there to offer all that you have
and all that you are in his worship. The star that drew the Magi draws us, too, nearer to
the gift of light in which rests all God’s promises. The old dispensation is past. Salvation
came first to the Jews among whom Jesus was born, fulfilling the dreams of the prophets
of old. But His life, death and resurrection touch a wider world, drawing in men from
the east, a Canaanite woman, a Roman centurion, and ultimately all humanity. While we
may, let us kneel and adore him.