

# Epiphany

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## Introduction

Today's gospel sits between two starkly and shockingly contrasting stories centred on children – the conception (and implicitly the birth) of Jesus, and the slaughter of the Innocents. The very different dynamics associated with these events are also woven through this text, and one of the ways that Matthew highlights them is through his use of different spaces as staging posts in the trajectory of the narrative.

## Anchor Question

Can you remember an occasion in which the space you were in was a significant factor in your emotional response to or understanding of what was going on? How can different sorts of spaces help or hinder the message we want to convey or the task we are trying to do?

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## Text

### Matthew 2:1–12, The Visit of the Magi

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.” 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.’”

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.” 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. When they saw that the star had

stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.

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## Comment

Like football, Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi is a game of two halves: In the first we see them encountering Herod and his court, and in the second Mary and the infant Jesus. Each half has a different emotional key which structures and drives the dynamics of its interactions: Herod's response to the meeting is fear – and the greek word *tarass*, which has overtones of being stirred and agitated, gives us the sense of a very visceral response...we can perhaps imagine Herod pacing restlessly up and down whilst he waits for the answers to his various questions. Matthew then shows us the consequence of this fear as we see Herod attempting to take control of the situation by pinning it down in various ways. Alongside this Matthew also reveals fear's destructive effect by showing us the increasingly constricted space within which Herod operates as the story unfolds. An initial open encounter involving the entire court (and circling out to 'all of Jerusalem') is replaced by meetings with a select few and finally a secret conversation with only the magi themselves. Herod's fear and need for control, successively reduces the degrees of freedom within which he can act and thus curtails his capacity to think and act creatively.

In the second half we see the operation of a diametric dynamic in which the Magi are content to simply follow where the star leads them. The overwhelming joy they feel when finally it stops provides the emotional key to the passage and here, in contrast to Herod's agitated summoning and questioning, there is a sense of tranquil, collected acceptance: they see, they kneel, they offer what they have. Once again this is a journey marked by changes of space – but this time the movement is from the constrained space of their final meeting with Herod into one where they are subjects with their own agency, not objects being controlled by the will of another. Matthew gives us a wonderful threefold sense of the accompanying expansion through the verb 'opening', its conjunction with the noun treasure-chest and finally in the gifts themselves – which each carry their own richly textured stories. There is a feeling that even though, as they ducked under the lintel of the house, the Magi might have entered a space which was physically small, they have actually come into a wide and generous, place in and from which a whole wealth of possibility can bud and blossom.

So on the one side we have a fear-driven constriction which ultimately leads to a terrible destructive act. On the other, an openness to possibility – foreshadowed by the actions of Joseph at the end of the preceding chapter – which brings a joyful, expansive experience for those involved.

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## Response

Often our initial responses to situations of uncertainty, threat, or conflict are reflex ones – deeply rooted in our previous experiences. But they can also be influenced by dispositions which have been more consciously chosen. Reflect on a challenging situation in which you've been involved recently – was your initial reaction one which hindered or helped you? What attitudes can you actively cultivate which might help you to open up possibility spaces in different areas of interaction in your life?

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## Prayer

Epiphany God, waiting to be encountered and embraced –  
forgive us for those times when fear or hostility  
restrict our openness to your Presence and possibility  
and keep us trapped in an empty place....

*silence or a kyrie*

Epiphany God, waiting to comfort and console –  
forgive us for those moments when fear or hostility  
restrict our openness to your Presence and possibility  
and keep us trapped in an unhealed place....

*silence or a kyrie*

Epiphany God, waiting to challenge and transform –  
forgive us for those occasions when fear or hostility  
restrict our openness to your Presence and possibility  
and keep us trapped in a barren place....

*silence or a kyrie*

Epiphany God – bright Morning Star,  
waiting to enrich and enlarge us –  
may we know your Presence with us now  
and, in opening ourselves to embrace its possibilities,  
find new places to inhabit  
and different ways  
by which to journey onwards.