

An introduction to the Christmas & Epiphany Seasons

The celebration of Christ's Incarnation (becoming flesh) at Christmas is one of the two 'poles' of the Christian year. The wonderful mystery of God-among-us (Emmanuel), foretold by the prophets and born of Mary, provides the material of the feast:

Hark, hark, the wise eternal word,
like a weak infant cries!
In form of servant is the Lord,
and God in cradle lies. (Thomas Pestel)

For the first 300 years or so of the Christian Church, Christmas was not celebrated. The traditions of the nativity play and the crib scene are said to descend from the tableau of Christ's birth that St Francis of Assisi arranged when he celebrated Christmas at Greccio in 1223. Christmas carols are a medieval tradition, which has been notably developed from the end of the 19th century; the service of readings and carols is an English creation of the late 19th century.

The Christmas season is celebrated for 12 days, beginning with Christmas Day and ending with the feast of the **Epiphany**. Contemporary use has sought to express an alternative tradition in which Christmas lasts for **40** days, ending with the **Feast of Candlemas** (the Presentation of Christ in the Temple) on 2 February.

In the Western Churches, the Epiphany ('manifestation') became an occasion to celebrate one element in the story of Christ's childhood, the visit of the far-travelled magi, understood as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (non-believing world). Matthew's account speaks simply of 'wise men from the east'; later tradition fixed their number at three, made them kings, and recalled their resonant names - Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. It is in this season that we pray for the worldwide mission of the Church. The Feast of the Conversion of St Paul ('Apostle to the Gentiles'), appropriately falls in this season too. In the Eastern Churches, the Epiphany is the celebration of Christ's baptism at the hands of John, when the heavens are opened and a voice from heaven declared Jesus to be God's Son. The miracle at Cana in Galilee (where water is turned into wine) follows immediately—where Jesus 'first manifested his glory'.

Manifest at Jordan's stream,
Prophet, Priest, and King Supreme;
and at Cana wedding-guest
in thy Godhead manifest. (Christopher Wordsworth)

The arrangement of the Sundays after Epiphany in the Revised Common Lectionary deliberately draws out these aspects.

The season of joyful celebration that begins at Christmas now continues through the successive Sundays of Epiphany, and the festal cycle ends only with the Feast of the Presentation (Candlemas). The child who has been manifested to the magi at his birth is now recognised by Simeon and Anna, when he comes to be presented in the Temple according to the Law of Israel. He is both a 'light to lighten the Gentiles' and 'the glory of God's people Israel.' But the redemption he will bring must be won through suffering; the Incarnation is directed to the Passion; and Simeon's final words move our attention away from the celebration of Christmas and towards the mysteries of Easter, from the crib to the cross...

The Epiphany Inscription over the Doorway of Church and Home

God bless this home

20 + C + M + B + 26

Christus Mansionem Benedicat



The letters have two meanings. They are the initials of the traditional names of the Three Magi: **Caspar, Melchior** and **Balthasar**. They also abbreviate the Latin words *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*. ("May Christ bless this house"). The letters recall the day on which the inscription is made, as well as the purpose of blessing.

The crosses represent the protection of Christ, and also the holiness of the Three Magi by their adoration of the Infant Christ.

The inscription is usually made above the door, so that all who enter and depart may enjoy God's blessing. The month of January still bears the name of the Roman god Janus, the doorkeeper of heaven and protector of the beginning and end of things. This blessing "christens" the ancient Roman observance of the first month. The inscription is made of chalk, a product of clay, which recalls the Word of God taking on human form – a reminder, too, of the clay from which Adam was formed, and into which God breathed.

A Form of Church / House Blessing

Peace to this house [of prayer]*

*used only in church

All **And to all who are at home within it.**

From the east came the Magi to Bethlehem, to adore the Lord,
and opening their treasures they offered precious gifts of -

Gold	- for a king
Frankincense	- for the true God
Myrrh	- the symbol of his death and burial.

Epiphany Collect

All **Creator of the heavens,
who led the Magi by a star to worship the Christ-child:
guide and sustain us, that we may find our journey's end
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

The inscription is then made over or near the door:

20 + C + M + B + 26

All **May Christ bless this house
and remain with us throughout the year.
Almighty God, bless us and all who gather here.
May the angels guard us in this place.
Amen.**

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Presentation of the Gifts

At the offering of the gold stole:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe:
to you be praise and glory for ever!

As gold in the furnace is purified,
so purify our hearts and minds
that we may be a royal priesthood
acceptable in the service of your kingdom.

Blessed be God for ever!

At the offering of the incense:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe:
To you be praise and glory for ever!

As our prayer rises up in your presence as incense,
so may we be presented before you
with contrite hearts and uplifted hands
to offer ourselves in your priestly service.

Blessed be God for ever!

At the offering of the holy oil:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe:
To you be praise and glory for ever!

As you give medicine to heal our sickness
and the leaves of the tree of life
for the healing of the nations,
so anoint us with your healing power
that we may be the first-fruits of your new creation.

Blessed be God for ever!

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