

BEING A CHRISTIAN IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

Isaiah 60: 1-6. Matthew 2: 1-12

What does it mean to be a Christian in 2026? We live in a world of many faiths and no faith. We also live in a world where people who claim the same faith are often very different in their morals and their ethics. What do you believe? How do you live? What commitments have you made in life? What values do you hold as standards to aspire to? Who are the models and heroes you look up to?

Just claiming to be a Christian can mean very little. Without giving clear content to your brand of Christianity, making a claim is just that: a claim. There are Christianities and there are Christianities. The differences within Christianity can be as different as that between religions. I can have more in common with someone of no faith than someone who claims to be a Christian with values and practices that horrify me.

Our scripture readings this morning teach us a lot about Christianity, but the models of Christianity we are offered are not Christians. The wise folk who make a long journey to find Jesus in order to worship him are not Christians. They're not even Jews. Their religion is not based on scripture. They are astrologers who study the movement of the stars in search of revelation from God. They live according to the seasons and the rhythms of nature as a pathway to inner harmony. Somehow the movement and the light of a particular star tell them there is a special child to be born who will open a door to salvation (wholeness) for all people, not just for Christians.

And just to underscore the divine faithfulness of the wise folk, there are the contrasting figures of the Jewish king Herod and the chief priests who are the top religious teachers of their people. Even though they know about the biblical prophecy pointing to the messiah's birth in Bethlehem, their sole concern is not finding the messiah to worship him, but rather, finding him in order to kill him because he will be a threat to their power and rule. Imagine that!

And what do the wise folk know about this child? Remarkably a lot. Their gifts reveal their understanding of who he is and what will happen to him. Gold represents the royalty of a messiah-king. Frankincense represents divinity and the recognition of divinity in the child. And Myrrh represents a vision of trouble to come and death because Myrrh is a spice for a dead body in preparation for burial. Isn't this all astonishing?!

But you know, there are different ways this story can be interpreted. And this emerges in the prophecy of Isaiah as much as in the story of the wise folk we have in our gospel.

One way to interpret this story is as a story of the conquest of Christianity and Jesus over other faiths and their peoples. “Arise, shine, your light has come” proclaims the prophecy. “Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you... They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” In other words, the superiority of truth in Christ and Christianity will draw in all people along with their wealth, and this is exactly what is happening with the wise folk from the east. They are bringing their expensive gifts to baby Jesus and bowing down before him. They are recognizing Christ as the way, the truth and the life and are submitting to his truth leaving their former truths of faith behind.

And this is certainly how European Christendom has understood such prophecy and this story. Europe was to conquer other peoples and their faiths because Europeans were superior in truth and right and others were wrong and inferior in their faiths along with their cultures and civilizations too.

And what is it we are witnessing right now in the U.S among other places with more fundamentalist forms of Christianity? “We are right and you are wrong”, fundamentalists believe. “We are better and more superior and you need to come to us, submit to us and follow us because we have the truth. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and we have Jesus and you do not. We know Jesus and you do not. We confess Jesus and you should do the same if you want to be saved and not end up in hell.”

Second, though, there is the total opposite pushback of our broader more modern culture of relativity. We all have our truths, and no one truth is greater than the other. Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth. We can discuss and share with one another and learn about each other’s truths, but ultimately there is no measure of greater or lesser truth. The wise folk come to honour Jesus out of respect, not submission. They are gracious neighbours from the east and part of another faith respecting this new faith emerging with Jesus to be called Christianity. They are not giving up any of their truth to honour Jesus. In fact it is through their religious truth that they have also found Jesus and so honour him.

But the danger of this kind of relativity is that it doesn’t aim higher than that. Are all religious truths and spiritualities the same in the end? Different in language and style, yes. Different in history and practice, yes. But do they all lead to the same destination in the end? We have no way to decide whether one truth is higher than another if we subscribe to modern relativity. We hope that all truths together make us all better, but there is no higher standard or authority to measure any particular faith as more or less true. This is relativity.

Well beyond these polar opposites, there is another way. Beyond the way of conquest and the belief that we are better, more superior, and that we have the truth and others don't, on the one

hand, and beyond the way of relativity where no one truth is any higher than another, on the other, there is the actual way of Jesus. And the word "way" is important here. In fact, we read in the bible that the earliest name given to Christians in the early days of Christianity was simply "the way." That's what people called those who followed Jesus and believed in Jesus: Followers of "the way." And this is important. Why? Because Christianity is not primarily a set of beliefs. Beliefs follow a way of being and living, a way of committing, engaging and relating. Whether we live the way perfectly or fail to live it all too often, "the way" suggests a path, a direction, a journey. What journey are you on? We're not simply talking about your personal journey here. We're talking about a set of values and commitments that shape the direction and focus of our lives, what we aim for, and how we build relationships. The wise folk followed a way. Their beliefs about Jesus and what was revealed to them about Jesus within their hearts and from the stars was about a way that led to the messiah-king.

OK, so what is this way about, then? What makes it "the way"? Well, Jesus not only teaches the way, but he also shows the way with his life. He talks about love of neighbour and he even talks about how love is greatest when you love not only your friend and family, but even your enemy. And he demonstrates such love not only by talking it but by living it through suffering, torture and a cruel death. You love someone by telling the truth and listening for their truth. And you love someone by continuing to speak truth even when they attack you and cause you to suffer. You win not by getting back at them and defeating them by putting them down. No. You win by continuing to push for justice without hating or retaliating, but always opening a door to possible reconciliation and the healing that is necessary for such reconciliation to happen.

Forgiveness is not just a word, it is a relationship and an experience that has to keep rising up in you when the bad feelings keep rising up in you too. Compassion is not just a sentimental feel-good virtue. It is a strong commitment of presence and accompaniment with another person or a group of people where you open your heart and your mind to listen and learn without offering advice or counsel unless that is what's sought for. I can go on, but I think you get the picture of "the way." I can talk about my beliefs, but unless my beliefs grow out of a way of living and committing my life, for all my imperfections, beliefs alone matter little. Jesus is my way, my truth and my life because his way of love has grasped my heart and soul and I have given my heart over to this way incarnated in the person of Jesus.

As I am baptized into Christ, and as his Spirit begins to move through me because I welcome the Spirit, I am energized and inspired to keep deepening my commitment and practice of the way even when I get it wrong and the trials and tribulations of life twist me up. The Spirit in me rises up again and moves me forward.

OK, but now we need to ask another question too. Is the way of Jesus and the way that is incarnated in Jesus only for Christians? What about other faiths? And what about the wise folk? Do they have the Holy Spirit? Well, you may not know much about Jesus, but if you embody

something of his kind of love, compassion and commitment to justice and truth telling on behalf of right, then Jesus is in you more than you may know. If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life then Jesus can live inside anyone who embraces such a way, a truth and life no matter what kind of religion they adhere to. Clearly whatever it is that has formed them and continues to form them leads them to Jesus and his way just like the wise folk. They may not confess Jesus as their Lord, but they live his way better than many who claim to be Christians. If you know how to take responsibility for your life, how to forgive, how to love even those who are not friends, how to call for justice without being poisoned by hate or feelings of retaliation, and if you have compassion in your heart for the vulnerable and open your heart in love before judging, then Jesus is in you more than you know. His Spirit is moving through you more than you know. Jesus is not confined to the historical man from Nazareth, but has risen to move through all kinds of folk anywhere in our world. God be praised!

So then, what do we learn about Jesus from the wise folk? We learn that anyone can find Jesus if they open their heart to worship him and open their heart to embrace his way which is not about beliefs but about a way of living, relating, committing and sometimes struggling with our conscience.

Is this your way? Does worship, prayer and meditation help inspire you and help you internalize and grow you're living "the way"? May 2026 provide fresh opportunity and inspiration for you to follow the way, the truth and the life that is Jesus in a way that becomes ever more personal and real for you.

Come, Holy Spirit, come... Amen.