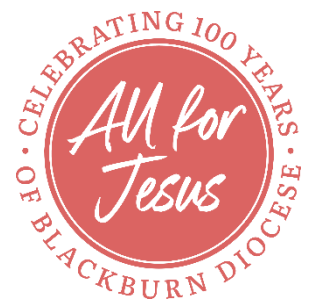




Centenary Sermon for the Feast of Epiphany

Sunday 4th January 2026

I wonder what you do with your unwanted Christmas gifts? It's always a bit awkward, isn't it? Receiving presents is lovely—there's something deeply touching about someone taking the time to choose something, wrap it up, and hand it over with love. That kind of generosity is beautiful.

But then there's the moment when you tear off the wrapping and find a book you've already got three copies of. Or a pair of Liverpool socks when you're an Arsenal supporter. Or aftershave that smells like someone let the dog out. You don't want to hurt the giver's feelings, but you're left wondering what to do with it. Apparently, over a third of Christmas gifts end up at the charity shop.

I love imagining myself into the Bible stories. So I often wonder what Mary and Joseph thought when the wise men turned up with their gifts. By any measure, these are strange presents for a baby. Gold, yes, that's useful for anyone. But incense when you live nowhere near the Temple? And myrrh, used for preparing bodies for burial? Maybe Mary had a quiet moment where she thought, "Lovely gesture, but what am I supposed to do with this?" Maybe she even considered slipping them off to the first-century equivalent of Oxfam, hoping the wise men wouldn't notice.

But of course, that's missing the point. Those gifts weren't really for Jesus. How could they be? The child lying in that manger is the Word made flesh. Everything already belongs to him—the stars, the earth, the whole of creation. You can't give a gift to the one who owns everything.

No, those gifts were for us. They tell us two things. First they tell us who Jesus is. Gold, because he is King, and not just any king, but King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Frankincense, because he is God, not just a prophet or a teacher, but God himself, born in our midst. And myrrh, because this King is born to die and to give his life away on the cross.

And second, because those gifts reveal who Jesus is they also reveal who we are. That gold is our gold because Jesus raises us up to share in his kingship. That frankincense is our frankincense because we have the incredible privilege of knowing Jesus and being with him in worship and prayer. That myrrh is our myrrh because as Jesus dies he dies the death we deserve on our behalf so that we can live for ever.

At Epiphany, the gifts reveal who Jesus is. And as they do so we find out who we are.

This Epiphany is a very special one in the Diocese of Blackburn. Today we launch our centenary year. In November 1926, most of Lancashire was lifted out of the Diocese of Manchester under the wise leadership of William Temple and became a brand new Diocese. Its cathedral was placed in Blackburn because Temple wanted a strong presence right in the very heart of industrial East Lancashire, surrounded with its mill

chimneys and mine wheels. Percy Herbert became our first bishop and so the journey began.

There is so much to give thanks for as we mark the centenary of our Diocese. A hundred years of faithful ministry offered in our parishes as they have worshipped and served and shared the good news. Our outstanding family of church schools which have offered the very best in education to hundreds of thousands of children. The generous service offered to diverse communities in every corner of Lancashire.

But anniversaries must not be about nostalgia. Part of the joy of the Christian life is that we know that the best is always still to come. Our Centenary is a year to look ahead with joy and hope and expectancy.

That's why our theme for 2026 is ***All for Jesus***. Just as the wise men laid their gifts before Jesus, so this is a year when we can lay our whole lives before Jesus afresh. For a gift even better than gold frankincense and myrrh is the gift of our lives, our hearts, our all. Just imagine if every person who is part of the Diocese of Blackburn made 2026 a year in which they got to know Jesus better and offered him their lives anew. Think what a difference that would make!

For as in our centenary year we present to the Lord the gift of our lives, we will discover two things.

First, we will see afresh who Jesus is. You see the truly amazing thing is this. The Jesus who is King, the Jesus who is God, the Jesus who is Lord of all things, that Jesus wants to know you. He wants to know you personally. He wants to spend time in your company. He loves you with a love that is so mind-blowing that to understand it fully would overwhelm us utterly. He was born so he could share your life. He died so you could be free from sin and death. He rose again so that you could gaze upon him for all eternity. When you make your life a gift to Jesus, you can know the love and the safety and reassurance that he alone brings.

And then second we will see afresh who we are. To know Jesus is to know ourselves and discover why we were made. Jesus has a plan and purpose for our diocese and he has a plan and purpose for your life. So in this centenary year, let's commit ourselves anew to worship and heartfelt prayer so that we can be transparent with his love. Let's be bold in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ so that many may hear about him and come to follow him. Let's be even more generous in our service and our giving so that the people of Lancashire can see for themselves the difference that the Gospel makes.

As we celebrate one hundred years, let's find fresh delight in living the Christian life. When the wise men gazed upon Jesus we are told they were overwhelmed with joy. May that joy be ours this centenary year. Joy in our history, joy in our calling, joy in Jesus, a joy so heartfelt that it echoes the joy of heaven itself. Amen.

Bishop Philip
Bishop of Blackburn