In the office downstairs which I share with the Canon Pastor, our PA, the Director of Music and the Head Verger, there is a sign on the back of the door which was placed there during the time of one of my predecessors. It says this: ‘The Church of England: loving Jesus with a slight sense of superiority since 597 AD’. (597 was the year in which St Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, came to Britain and got us going, so to speak…)

‘Loving Jesus with a slight sense of superiority’. What do you make of that? A sense of superiority – slight or otherwise – is, of course, one of the constant hazards we need to guard against – in the Church of England in general and as a cathedral in particular. But as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany today I want to take my cue from the back of our office door and then throw the net rather more widely. I want to invite us to think – not about ‘The Church of England: loving Jesus with a slight sense of superiority since 597 AD’ – but about ‘The Church in general: loving Jesus with a very definite sense of superiority since BC became AD’.

The Feast of the Epiphany is the festival which introduces the ‘wise men from the East’ into our celebrations of the birth of Christ. They’re rather curious characters, aren’t they? As with several other elements of the Christmas story, tradition has added a great deal to the distinctly bare bones of what Matthew (the only Gospel writer to include them) chooses to tell us.

Over the years these anonymous ‘wise men’ (or ‘astronomer-priests’, which is what the Greek word ‘magoi’ points to more precisely) have been treated to a comprehensive makeover. For a start they’ve been given names. They’ve also been upgraded to royal status by being called the three ‘kings’. So we have Balthasar, a king of Arabia, Melchior, a king of Persia and Gaspar, a king of India. Notice, by the way, that Matthew doesn’t actually specify that there were three of them – we only tend to assume this from the fact that three gifts are mentioned.

None of this detracts though from what they are actually doing in the Christmas story. Here is a group of foreign VIPs coming to Jerusalem, searching diligently for the child, being overwhelmed with joy when they find him, seeing Jesus with Mary his mother, kneeling down, paying him homage, opening their treasure-chests, offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

All of which ties in neatly with the dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel, which is to emphasise the idea that Jesus is the king of all. And by ‘all’ we really do mean ‘all’. Including this group of foreign dignitaries who, presumably, come with their own well-established patterns of religious belief and practice. Even they kneel in worship before the manger throne of the infant Christ. The wise men didn’t come from just down the road – theirs was a long journey from far away. And so what we focus on today is that there is no-one who is not welcome to seek and to find God in Christ. And that there is no part of our planet which we are abandon as a ‘no-go area’ for Christian faith.

Now this isn’t a very popular line to go down, is it? It runs contrary to the desires of those who see all religions as much of a muchness, those would like to try and make life a bit simpler by dividing the world up between the different faiths. But the wise men will have none of it. They underline for us right from the start what Jesus himself declares at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…’
Which is where we came in: ‘The Church in general: loving Jesus with a definite sense of superiority since BC became AD’. I put it like this because I want us to rub our noses in what can, if we’re not really careful, be seen by those on the outside as the downright offensiveness of the Christian claim. It’s not that we’re boasting about any sense of superiority for ourselves. Not at all – what we’re saying is that there is now what there always has been – something uniquely special about Jesus Christ – which makes him superior, which puts him head and shoulders above every other way of coming to know God and share his life.

Actually, perhaps without realising it, we’ve already been emphasising this in our worship this morning:

...The grace of God has dawned upon the world through our Saviour Jesus Christ...

...thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father...

...Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever...

The challenge for us, especially in a place like this, is to know how to hold what we believe so clearly about Jesus Christ alongside our desire to be welcoming and hospitable and genuinely to honour and give space to those who think differently. What we mustn’t do is choose between them. We need both perspectives in order to reflect the life of Christ authentically.

Epiphany faces us with a Jesus Christ who is not merely another religious leader to add to the list. No. Here is someone on a different list altogether – a list of just one. This is ‘Christ the Lord, ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored’. Because of who he is, he ought to be at the centre of the life of everyone – in every place and in every culture. Epiphany invites us humbly to embrace for ourselves and then to share with the whole world the glory of ‘The Church in general: loving Jesus with a definite sense of his superiority since BC became AD’. Amen.