

Epiphany 2013

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Last Sunday, the first after Christmas, thanks to a generous offer by Fr Mark I found myself free from normal duties. I took myself off to a different church to attend the Eucharist, one not very far at all from here [where I live], but equally one where I felt I could be anonymous. Sure enough, the only person I knew, and who recognised me, was the Parish Priest, who greeted me as I left. A different setting, a very different style of worship, different music, and a quite different community for whom I had absolutely no responsibility; all of this helped me to worship from a quite fresh perspective, and to be in some way restored and refreshed. There is something about stepping aside from our regular pattern that enables us to see things in a new way, to imagine different outcomes, and to form fresh resolves. That's why it seems natural for many of us to make New Year's resolutions at this time of year – when we have had some time off work, and have found some extra mental space and time for reflection; because reflection and insight comes from taking the time and the space that enables it to happen.

The Crib scene is a natural focus for reflection at Christmas and Epiphany. It's for that reason that, as in many other churches, we now keep our church crib in place right through to Candlemas (the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple) in a month's time. There's something about this tableau of the Nativity in which time stands still and we can savour the wonder and the meaning of Christ's birth. The story of the birth of Christ is only represented in two of the four New Testament Gospels. One of them, Luke, tells of the Angels and the Shepherds going to the manger, the other, Matthew, which we've just heard, singles out the journey of the Wise Men, and their gifts. Though the two elements inevitably get conflated in our Christmas Cards and Nativity plays, they each have their own significance. The story marked at Epiphany is of Gentiles – people not of the Jewish faith into which Jesus himself was born – who have nonetheless travelled from the East, convinced that something of universal significance is taking place. Perhaps even *because* they are 'outside' the accepted circle of religious authority and observance, they perceive majesty where others may only see another ordinary birth in humble circumstances – they sense holiness, and pause in awe and worship, where others would simply bustle busily on to the next place, activity, or item on the agenda. Anyone who pauses and truly worships at the wonder of Christ's birth will - like those wise men, though for different reasons – leave the scene 'by another road', not returning to all the old ways, company, and habits of before. The full realisation of God's gift to us in Jesus inspires us to present gifts of our own: as one of our seasonal prayers puts it, 'not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but hearts and voices raised in praise of Jesus Christ, our light and our salvation'.

For this reason, I believe that Epiphany serves the purpose – right at the start of a new year – of reminding us why we come to church at all. Hints of this reminder surround us in the hymns we sing today, from the prayer to the 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning',

to the exhortation to 'worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness'. The recollection of the Wise Men brings us right back to the true role of **Sabbath** to all Christian people. From the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses, the Israelites were told to keep the 7th day of each week holy – to refrain from work, and to set it apart for rest, and for the worship of God. Past generations of Christian people perhaps suffered from an over-puritanical application of that principle, leading many to dread Sunday as the most boring and restrictive day of the week. But the Magi from the East in today's Gospel, like the worship I experienced at another church's crib last Sunday, reminds us that this and *every* Sunday we are invited simply to refresh our wonder at the Incarnation, and the vision that incarnation allows us – that (in the words of last week's Collect) as Jesus 'came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity'