

Epiphany – Tim Clifford Hill

Melchior, Caspar, Balthazar - the believed names of the three men who brought gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to the Christ-Child. Sometimes referred to as 'Kings', or 'Magi' or (as in today's Gospel account) 'Wise Men.'

The term 'Magi' comes from the Ancient Greek word 'Magos' - meaning Magician - because as part of their Zoroastrian religion they were astrologers and following stars was a magical thing to do.

The term 'Kings' comes from a phrase in the Old Testament, from the Psalms and the Prophet Isaiah. 'Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him.'

I don't know about you, but when we unwrap our Nativity set every Christmas, I enjoy placing the Magi figures a long way from the Manger. Until today, our Magi have been sitting high up on a bookshelf.

My mother cares less about the location of the Magi at my parent's house, in Oxfordshire. The Magi seem to have already arrived at the Manger, in that corner of South Oxfordshire.

So whenever we visit, I find myself moving them from their Manger position. When we leave, my mother moves them back. And when we return again, over the Christmas period, I move them again. It's turned into a little Christmas tradition and this year, to my relief and pride, our three year old, Henry, has been helping me. It's become two against one!

You may think it petty, or amusing, but to me it really matters. The journey that our Magi nativity figures go on, is a visible reminder of the journey that the actual Magi took.

It can't have been an easy journey. The poet, T S Eliot, in his famous poem 'Journey of the Magi' describes it as the 'worst time of year for a journey, and such a long journey; the ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter.'

They didn't take a direct route. If you look at their journey on a modern day map, you'll see that they went from what we now call Iraq, up to Syria and then down towards Bethlehem.

And to top it all, they were carrying precious gifts. Gold, a symbol of wisdom and wealth. Incense, a symbol of worship and sacrifice. Myrrh, a symbol of healing and embalming.

Precious physical gifts but also precious gifts because each one refers to the future of the child they journeyed to visit. Incense - for the sacrifice on the cross. Myrrh - for the embalming before being laid in the tomb. Gold - for the King of Kings, who rose again on Easter morn. The Magi are signalling that this baby is the Messiah and we know that those signals, those gifts, refer to this baby's future. The word 'Epiphany' means 'showing (also known as manifesting) forth.'

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, they don't call today's festival Epiphany. They call today the festival of the 'Theophany.' The word Theophany means 'showing God.'

And they don't just celebrate the wise men coming from the east, but also the baptism of Christ, and when Christ turned water into wine. Three key moments in Scripture where the divine nature of Jesus is shown (manifested!) clearly to us.

Our liturgical year focuses on Christ's Baptism and that miracle at Cana at other points this month. Today, for us, it's all about the Magi and their journey. After the Magi had given their gifts, they continued on their journey. God had warned them, in a dream, not to return to Herod but carry on to their own country. As they journeyed on and away from Bethlehem, the Magi were still guided by God. So perhaps, once our nativity figures have reached the manger today, they should return back to the bookshelf tomorrow. The visible sign of their journey home.

But in reality those nativity figures will soon be put back in their box, and back into the loft. As the liturgical year continues, and only next month we have Candlemas and the beginning of the 'Sundays before Lent.'

Yet Epiphany reminds us that the truth of Christmas never ends. God journeys on with each of us as well. He invites us to know the light of his love, his joy, his peace and his hope and guides and supports us, as we journey on our own individual paths of life. And he invites us to be bearers of Jesus, the light of the world, today and every day.