

Dear friends,

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Probably the highlight of the Christmas period was, as expected, the Christmas Eve Carol service at All Saints. It was certainly the best attended. 316 people crammed into a compact, historic church and the atmosphere was electric. The carols and readings were punctuated by two songs, one sung by Richard Stewart and the other by Paul Painter. To cap it all off the wedding couple I'd married a couple of weeks ago were there and gave me a little gift after the service. My last carol service ever proved to be a really good one.

Tragedy struck on Christmas day when two swimmers were lost in treacherous seas at the annual Christmas day dip at Budleigh Salterton. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families and friends of course.

We were joined by my daughter Claire in Christmas week which was a rare treat. Christmas and boxing day dinners were huge which necessitated a couple of lovely walks down to Budleigh and Sidmouth. Claire joined us for three of the four services on Christmas Eve and Christmas day (including midnight Mass), understandably just missing the last one at Otterton. A Christmas to remember.

Sunday 4th January – Epiphany

Colin Randall will preside at both services at St. Peter's. I will preside at All Saints East Budleigh and John Archibald will preside at St. Michael's at 11am.

Isaiah 60: 1-6. Epiphany is about clear insight and understanding coming from when a light is switched on in a dark room – all becomes clear. Isaiah prophesies that all nations will be drawn to this light and bring gifts of Gold and frankincense

Ephesians 3: 1-12. “The mystery was made known to me by revelation”. This is Paul's description of his Epiphany on the road to Damascus. Revelation is of course progressive and often gradual but that massive hit all at once where he was knocked off his horse and taken up into paradise was what was obviously needful in his case.

Matthew 2: 1-12. The visit by the Magi from the East is understood by almost all scholars as being by Zoroastrian priests from Persia. There is no mention of how many of them there were – there could have been anything from 2 to 20 but only that there were three gifts so by tradition only there were “Three wise men”. The frankincense and Gold from Isaiah's prophesy are there and added to that is Myrrh – an embalming ointment.

Thought for the Day

In the Western church, the main story for Epiphany is the visit by the Magi whilst in the Eastern church it is the Baptism of Christ. In our lectionary we will have both stories on consecutive Sundays. Epiphany is about revelation and clarity so the gifts brought by the Magi, which incidentally is in the Bible as an untranslated Persian word, have symbolic

value in telling us the significance of this child Jesus is. Gold is normally taken to be a symbol of Royal authority so the gift of Gold tells us that Jesus is prophesied to be a certain kind of King. Frankincense is associated with a priestly function. A "Priest" properly understood is an intermediary between God and humanity who offers sacrifices to God to atone for the people's sins. Myrrh is the strange one but is used to embalm bodies after they have died. This indicates that the death of Jesus is going to be highly significant in the whole "Jesus event". Understanding biblical symbolism is important in understanding the Bible as a whole. The name of Jesus is highly symbolic in its own right. Jesus is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Joshua" which means literally "God is salvation", whilst Emmanuel literally means "God is with us". Incidentally, small groups of Zoroastrians do still exist in Iran, although small and persecuted by the Islamic authorities, though most exist in present day India where they are known as Parsees, particularly in Mumbai where they are a mercantile class. They are there through having to flee from previous waves of Islamic persecution. Once dismissed as a colourful fable, the existence of Zoroastrians in Persia (the East) who were expert astrologers and astronomers and the fact that the word Magi appears untranslated lends scholars to suppose that the visit is actually a historical fact. The fact also that they arrived and visited the Holy Family in their "house" and that Herod wanted all male children under two killed lends credence to the fact that they arrived up to two years after the birth in a Manger when they were in more settled accommodation.

The Prayer for Today. The end of the year is upon us and we all get older these words written above the clock in Chester Cathedral.

When as a child I laughed and wept, Time crept.

When as a youth I waxed more bold, Time strolled.

When I became a full grown man, Time ran.

When older still I daily grew, Time flew.

Soon I shall find, in passing on,, Time gone.

O Christ, wilt thou have saved me then?

Amen.

Love and peace,

Martin