

Dear friends,

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

I hope this hasn't woken anyone up too early after a heavy night. All the Christmas services went very well indeed and were as well attended as expected. Midnight Mass at St. Peter's drew as many people as Christmas morning. All the Carol services at each church were enjoyable but the one at All Saints on Christmas Eve always has a special quality and this year was no different with about 230 people cramming into this village church which creates a magical atmosphere.

Though on Saturday saying prayers over the dead body of a much loved member of St Peter's, David Hassell with his sister Kay had the effect of bringing me up short and realising what this calling is really all about.

We are flying from Heathrow tomorrow so an early start for us and I'll try and keep in contact intermittently over the next three months with events and thoughts and in the "thought" today I'll give a few details of the itinerary, so soul food in its familiar form will be back in April.

Sunday 5th January – The Epiphany

We'll be in Langkawi on Sunday attending Mass at the Stella Maris catholic church in Kuah in the evening. Here in good old Blighty, Chris Cant will preside at the 8am and Ken Parry at the 10am in St. Peter's and Colin Randall will preside at All Saints at 9.30am and John Archibald will preside at St. Michael's.

Isaiah 60: 1-6. Zion or "Israel" is called to rise from despair and shine with God's radiance. They will shine so brightly with the reflected glory of God that all nations will be drawn to find out the source of that light (fulfilling their role as being a light to the gentiles). They won't come empty handed but bearing gifts of Gold and Frankincense.

Ephesians 3: 1-12. The mystery of God has been hidden in plain sight from humankind since the dawn of time but is revealed in the Christ child. The task of explaining and unfolding this mystery has been left to the church – to us. God is here and will never leave us and he loves us unconditionally. God is the God of Grace and it's our job to keep that flame alive and shining bright so in the words of Isaiah people come to us to find out the source of the light.

Matthew 2: 1-12. I'm fascinated by this story. Far from being a fable, Matthew calls them "Magi" (not Kings or wise men) who were priests/astrologers of the Zoroastrian religion dominant in Persia at this time – East of the Holy Land. Nowhere does it say there were just three of them just that there were three gifts. The Zoroastrians were also looking for a Messiah that would be born of a virgin in their own religion. The Gold and Frankincense mentioned in Isaiah is supplemented by Myrrh used for anointing the dead, indicating that his death would be significant. Gold for his kingship and Frankincense indicating his priestly function.

Thought for Today

We will be starting in Malaysia, a Muslim majority country starting by detoxifying and resting in Langkawi and transferring back to Kuala Lumpur. Here we also have an Ignatian prayer retreat at the Maranatha house of prayer in the hills around Kuala Lumpur and when back in the city I have an appointment/introduction to the Dean of the Anglican cathedral. We'll offer ourselves and get involved with their activities there for sure but don't know if they'll want me to lead or preach at any time. Louise has a appointment set up to deliver a talk at Kuala Lumpur university. We then depart for

Borneo staying in a Muslim Halal hotel in Kuching and also staying with tribespeople in a longhouse in the Jungle. (These people were head hunters just a generation or so ago but we are assured they are well past that kind of thing!). From there we fly to Chennai (formally Madras) in India. While there we stay for a week in a Catholic/Hindu ashram living on lentils and meditating and doing good works. When back in Chennai we will also attend a service at the Mar Thoma church and also the catholic St. Thomas Basilica where the apostle Thomas was martyred. From there we fly to Sri Lanka where we will be based in Kandy and attached to the Anglican St. Paul's church which is just a stone throw away from the Temple of the tooth – a world-famous Buddhist shrine. We fly back to the UK from Colombo on the 28th March.

Spiritually we will be reading a chapter a day from St. Paul's letters (which will take three months – we've checked) Keeping a diary/journal (new for me) Morning contemplative prayer (Ignatian) and the Examen in the evening (also Ignatian). And of course, Sunday worship wherever we are in either Anglican or Catholic or Orthodox churches.

The Prayer for Today is a prayer that is very special to me. It is from a Jewish prayer book and I used to pray it every morning in the coach to our band of pilgrims when I lead a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the year 2000. It is a Prayer for Travellers.

**May the God who called our Father Abraham
To journey into the unknown,
And guarded him and blessed him,
Protect ne too and bless my journey.
May his confidence support me as I set out,
May his Spirit be with me on the way,
And may he lead me back to my home in peace.
Those I love, I commend to his care.
He is with them, I shall not fear.
As for myself,
May his presence be my companion,
So that blessing may come to me
And to everyone I meet.
Blessed are you Lord
Whose presence travels with his people.**

Love and peace,
Martin