

Well, I wonder whether by last night you had dutifully taken down your Christmas decorations?! It seems that these days many people think that somehow it is 'bad luck' to leave the Christmas decorations up beyond 'twelfth night'.

But we know that the twelfth day of Christmas is the 'Epiphany of the Lord' – and that the Christmas season lasts not for twelve days but forty. Christmastide will continue until the second of February: Candlemas. And so, to leave our decorations up is to continue to celebrate 'good news of great joy'!

Today is when the good news of the Christmas story reaches a level of even greater joy. You may have noticed that our 'Wise Men' who since Christmas had been hovering in the choir stalls – 'in the East' – have now taken up residence in our Christmas Crib. Our Christmas Crib has therefore become an Epiphany Crib! You see, the 'Magi' were educated people from outside of Israel. Their visit indicated that the birth of the long-awaited Messiah was good news not exclusively for the Jewish nation, but for *all* nations.

During the four weeks of the Epiphany season we will be seeing the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of all revealed in a variety of ways. In two weeks for example, we will consider his first 'sign' as described in John's gospel: the turning of water into wine. By this sign, John tells us (with deliberate precision) that Jesus 'revealed his glory'.

So with the theme of Epiphany being Jesus' 'manifestation to the nations' the Epiphany season is a time for us not only to continue celebrating the good news of 'God with us' but also to be praying for the worldwide mission of his Church.

This is very much the focus of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which always concludes – purposely – on the twenty-fifth of January. On that day we commemorate the Conversion of St Paul, the 'Apostle to the Gentiles' (the 'nations'). Here in Richmond we will mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by an ecumenical Agape Meal, on Wednesday the 23rd of January at 7pm – to be held in the Town Hall. Do come if you can: for further details please see the Pew Sheet!

And perhaps during the Epiphany season we can be using our heightened awareness of God being with us to receive any 'epiphany moments' offered to us. An 'epiphany moment' is defined as 'a moment of sudden and great revelation'. Anyone looking on at the Wise Men visiting Jesus would have realised that there was something extraordinary about this particular child.

There they were: kings from far away, paying homage to a mere child with expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Every day (and usually in rather smaller ways!) God yearns to offer us 'epiphany moments' – assuring us not only of his presence with us but also his infinite and unfailing love.

Perhaps in your fruit-bowl at home you still have a hazelnut left over from the Christmas festivities. When you look at it, remember that for the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich it was something this small that triggered for her a classic epiphany moment. She was shown that the hazelnut had been made by God himself, and that he had made it with infinite and unfailing love.

Such a little thing gave to Julian and can give to us deep peace in the knowledge that it was with such love that God made her, and you, and me, and the whole world. In the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are shown – if we know how to see – that this tender love of God for us is simply unlimited.

In order for us to be able to see a profound significance in something small we have to be attentive; we have to take the trouble to slow down and take in whatever is offered to us.

For example, we are meant to notice that the visit of the Wise Men took place some time after Jesus' birth – which could even have been a few years! You see, their journey from a far country in the East could have been at a speed no faster than their camels could walk: 3mph!

And it is at about 3mph that human beings walk. Think about it. Jesus – God in human form – would have walked at the same speed as the rest of us. So a 'sudden and great revelation' we are being offered here is that our God is 'the 3mph God'!

The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama coined that very phrase: 'the 3mph God'. Koyama concludes that the 'speed of Love' is 3mph – and he asks us the profound question: if we travel faster than Jesus then who is it that are we following? Crucially, he observes, "the reality is that, when time is love, speed equals less of it. The love of God is inexorably slow. Jesus walked slowly: love takes time."

So, over the next four weeks, let us see if we can make friends with time rather than try to work against it. And let's aim to spend time with the God of Love, the 3mph God, asking him to teach us to live in his time.

The visit of the Wise Men – and all the other events we will recall during the forthcoming Epiphany season – is about 'the manifestation of God's glory', of God's love for all people. In these events let's see afresh that in sending his

Son as one of us God was showing us that he wants to spend time with us. His love for us really is that strong, that 'inexorable'. Think of the slow but sure movement of a glacier: there's no stopping it, and over time it transforms the landscape.

In the story of the Wise Men, just as we are meant to notice the significance of their having come from a distant nation, of their being guided with overwhelming joy to the place where Jesus was, and of the symbolism of their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (perhaps especially the myrrh), we are meant also to notice that as a result of their encounter with the Son of God, they were transformed: they 'returned home by another road'.

As we seek to follow the example of the Wise Men, we might ask God to help us to become 'wise people' too, using the words of this prayer:

Send Wisdom forth from your holy heavens,
from the throne of your glory send her.
That she may labour at our side
and that we may learn what is pleasing to you.
For she knows and understands all things,
she will guide us wisely in our actions,
and guard us with her glory.

Amen.