Epiphany Wam & LBam 3/1/21.

Although we celebrate it today, officially next Wednesday is Epiphany, sometimes known as twelfth night, the time when most of us take down our decorations, if we have not done it before. So Christmas is over.

Or is it? In the Eastern Orthodox Church what we call Epiphany is when they celebrate Christmas. Epiphany is the revealing of Jesus to the world and as a season continues to Candlemas, the 2nd of February. So there is a case for keeping decorations up until then, if you really want to.

In our readings on Christmas day and since we have heard how many people went to see the new baby, notably first the shepherds, and later the oriental visitors. Late stragglers they may have been, but they were, they are pretty special characters in our story.

“Wise men from the east”, Matthew called them (Matthew 2:1). They had seen a star rising, which proclaimed the one born to be king of the Jews, and came to pay him homage.

So what of the shepherds and wise men.

Think how different the shepherds and the wise men were from each other. The shepherds probably wore rough clothing, for working outside in all weathers. The wise men, however many of there were, no doubt rich and important, and so could afford good cloth, even for travelling.

The shepherds would not have been well-educated, though if they were Jewish, they might well have learned to read. The wise men were proficient in analysing the movement of the stars and calculating the patterns of astronomy. They would have read books on wisdom and prophecy.

The shepherds came from fields nearby – ‘in that region’… The wise men came from the east – possibly from Persia or Arabia. They would not have been Jewish but most likely Zoroastrian.

They were utterly different in background, in culture, in religion, in appearance. But they all came to the crib.

And their paths to the crib were very different too.

The wise men had spent about 2 years getting to the crib.

They must have been looking in the sky and maybe elsewhere in nature for signs. They made calculations, and reflected, and thought.

But they did not get to the crib straight away. They may have made some detours, even some wrong turnings. (No satellite navigation .)

Matthew says that when they got to Jerusalem they had to ask Herod the way to the king of the Jews, and he had to get the chief priests and the scribes to do more research, which finally pointed the way to Bethlehem. It was a thoughtful, pondering, slow and difficult path.

Now think about the shepherds. They were not even looking for a sign. They were just getting on with life – “watching over their flocks by night” – when suddenly there was a blinding light, a loud voice, giving an absolutely clear pronouncement: “to you is born in the city of David a saviour who is the Messiah; the sign is this: a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”.

There was no deliberation amongst the shepherds: they just decided: “Let's go, now, to Bethlehem to see whatever it is that has taken place”.

They did not say: “well, I wonder what that was all about? I’m not sure whether we have heard right. Perhaps we should check in the angelic directory about the credentials of these messengers”.

They just went to see!

And they didn’t take 2 years about it. They ‘went with haste’ and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. It was a bright, obvious, fast and simple path.

Do you find your faith journey takes you on one or other of these paths? It might be that someone comes to God by a slow and rather winding path.

They might find hints and whispers of God in nature, and keep their eyes and ears open to the insights of others.

They may ponder and wonder, maybe having no clear idea of exactly what they are looking for, but still keep on the path, hoping that they will one day see the star come to rest, above the One they have sought with so much faithfulness and trust.

Probably for many of us our faith journeys are this way as we come week by week and year by year seeking the Lord of all in our readings, the sacraments and in our prayers.

Or you might sense that you are more like one of the shepherds: caught up in a spiritual experience, spontaneously responding with faith and acceptance. A sort of ‘St Paul on the road to Damascus’ thing. We see this emphasised in some kinds of worship and spirituality: especially in the more charismatic churches – ‘heart-stuff’ comes before ‘head-stuff’, and things seem clear, revealed, certain and demanding an immediate response.

We are each on our own journey and it is probably wrong of me to make such a clear distinction. It encourages division. We might then tempted to say, ‘feeling matters more than thinking’ or ‘thinking matters more than feeling’.

The fact is, of course, that there is something of the shepherd and something of the wise men in each of us. And this is as it should be:

God calls us through the willing response of our hearts and also by our thoughtful pondering about what the world is like, our own lives, and the mysteries of existence.

Think of Jesus’ mother, Mary, watching by the crib. Mary had let her heart be captured by the Holy Spirit: she said to the angel: “Let it be unto me according to God’s will – that is, she saw a sudden revelation, and she responded with a heart-felt ‘yes’.

But then in the stable, welcoming all these strange visitors who were seeking her child, the babe in the manger: Luke says: ‘Mary treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

Mary, is a good model for us as disciples of Christ, responded in a flash, and yet pondered for years.

One major thing which Epiphany shows us, that it was not just the Jews who would come to the stable, to their homeland, but all nations, bringing the wealth of their experience, and their insights and their traditions.

God calls us to be open and to welcome everyone who comes: whether they are tentative seekers or those who ‘know’; whether they are pondering in their search or feeling overwhelmed with the love of God.

Our journeys will all be different and individual, some harder than others.

However well we think we know our scripture and our faith, God still has much more he wants us to know, and so we need to continue on our way with all the enthusiasm we had when we first started out.

We will all find a space at the manger; we can all offer the gift of ourselves, head, heart and all; and we can all know that we are called and loved by the one who shines light into our darkness, and whose glory rises upon us, not just today but in the dawning of every new day.