

The decorations are disappearing. More's the pity. In general, the Christmas season is judged to have outstayed its welcome by about the second of January. Time to be moving on; time to get back to business. But Christmas hangs on tightly – for some of us. We sing of the 12 days of Christmas, and stubbornly cling to our decorations – our lights – our sense of wonder.

And it might surprise you to know (though, knowing me, it shouldn't surprise you) that there is a fairly brisk conversation – among some church people at this time of year - around the way we tell the Christmas story.

We've all seen the manger scenes. Here at St John's, we boasted several - strategically placed - throughout December. And one of those remains assembled and on display. Now, most of our 'classic' manger scenes includes all of the key figures: the Holy family (of course) – an assembly of animals, and their keepers – angels (naturally) – and three (always only three) gentlemen in exotic costume, bearing gifts. And the conversations that I refer to almost always revolve around these three characters.

The most insistent of my theological friends prefer that the Magi not be present in any manger scenes until – well – yesterday. For some hard-core celebrators, they are often whimsically placed around the house – anywhere BUT in the vicinity of Jesus' cradle (who, as it happens, should not be present himself until December 24th at the earliest.)

There are long, drawn-out internet stories offered which depict the journey of the Magi – and their encounters with ordinary household obstacles – which end triumphantly on the 12th day of Christmas – the feast of the Epiphany.

Often enough I would be inclined to lecture on the meaning of the word – the nuance of discovery and enlightenment that finds its focus in Jesus – but today, perhaps because of the post-Christmas adventures in air travel that Lea and I ‘enjoyed’ last week, I am drawn to this part of the story that we usually give only passing thought; **the trip they took**.

Wise men from the east – so the gospel of Matthew calls them. Magus – a word that conjures images of conjurers. Flowing robes and mystic sensibilities. Our carols call them Kings – but these chaps wield a different kind of power.

Real kings don’t often go on voyages of discovery - they delegate. But the gospel tells us that this group took the trip. They set out for Judea, driven by curiosity and a desire to celebrate the potential of something that captured their curiosity.

These outsiders bring their own interpretation of the things that they studied and the events that they witnessed. They bring the questions raised by their observations and drop those questions into the middle of the story.

“Where is the king of the Jews” (they ask the *de facto* king of the Jews) With one question they have accused a ruler of fraud and undermined Herod’s authority. The nerve! But for these visitors, who have nothing ‘invested’ in the story of God’s people, it is easy. Their expectations (and assumptions) are big and broad – they don’t seem bothered by the ordinary human boundaries of nation, creed, or race. They are outsiders – gentiles – not part of the covenant promise (or so goes the argument) but wait, the prophet has opened the door, and the curious travellers are happy to stroll right in. The gifts they bring reflect the prophet’s promise. They prove that they have been paying attention.

This trip they take – at some risk to themselves – is not finished with their worship (homage paying). They opt to go the long way home, warned in a dream of Herod's wrath. They remained curious – open to heavenly suggestion - even after they found what they were originally looking for.

These strangers who are responsible for the extension of our holiday season teach us that goals are almost always moving targets: notice the star – determine a path forward – find the king – offer worship and gifts – keep heart, mind and eyes open for the next adventure...

In the context of our present time – or our future hopes and dreams – the lessons of the Magi are invaluable. These curious and determined strangers might help us navigate faithfully in this changing and challenging world.

From them we might learn patience. The reward at the conclusion of their journey was no sure thing. Their curiosity was fuelled by hope of something wonderful, and not even Herod's reputation (or his eventual response) would keep them from their quest.

The Magi bring cultural diversity to the story of Jesus. They cross many boundaries; always without judgement – sustained by that same glorious hope that the prophet Isaiah describes.

In a world of near constant conflict – at a time of great uncertainty – don't you think that we could use a little of the hopeful curiosity that was evident in these ancient explorers?

Could we let our honest questions draw us from our sheltered certainties and towards a new understanding of the world around us?

Could we, in faith, seek the king and pay respect to all that Jesus represents – and then journey on? Because if we are willing to do that – to take that risky trip and acknowledge the presence of ‘God-with-us’ – we might find that the rest of our journey will be made a little easier. Not because God has suddenly swept all obstacles away, but because hope is a wonderfully buoyant and bountiful motivation.

The glory that attracted the attention of those wise wanderers is present in the world – it is drawing us, even now, to its brilliance. The world works hard to disguise the fact that God is with us. We have the example of the Magi to help us learn to look past the disguises to see the light of God.