

Epiphany Matthew 2:1-12

Well it's all over for another year. At least, that's true for those for whom Christmas holds no religious significance. The fuss is all about the day and preparing for the day, these few days after are just a brief interlude until everyone goes back to work and we all get some routine back.

Having Christmas fall towards the end of our calendar year it's only natural that we are generally, this week, feeling like we have reached the end of something. The Christmas story is also wrapped up in Old Testament prophesy coming to fulfilment. The end to a time of waiting for God's chosen people. Throughout our advent and Christmas readings we have heard reference to promises made by God to his chosen people through the prophets. Even in Today's gospel a reference to the prophecy that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem. For the Jewish people, if this child was the Christ then their wait was at an end.

Yet Christmas is in so many ways all about beginnings, that's why Advent is the start of the Church's year. Christmas is about a birth, the start of a human life, in it's most basic form the story is about a beginning, how a child, a particularly special child, was brought into the world. A child whose life and example we follow and try to live up to and whose story we will follow up to his death and beyond this year as we do every year.

Christmas is about beginnings in other ways too, not just the beginning of Jesus' life, also the beginning of a new relationship between God and humanity. Beyond the basic story of a newborn, this is the story of incarnation, God made human, a new intervention into God's created world. It is a story of past prophesies fulfilled but with the fulfilment of prophecy comes new beginnings as the nature of the relationship changes and the prophesied one does what he came to do for God's people.

But it is also a story of new beginnings in who it was God would come into relationship with. This story is all that was prophesied and more because the Jewish people never expected their messiah to attract the attention of the gentiles, the non-Jews, in the way in which he did. They expected him to overthrow their gentile oppressors, they would be victorious with God on their side, that would get foreign attention of course, but it was not foreseen that he would bring into relationship with God all who responded to him in faith.

The Epiphany tells of this beginning. The beginning of a new audience for the word of God, it tells of our beginning. It seems that there was no other purpose in recording this strange visit of magi to the infant Christ if not to encourage the reader of the gospel to broaden their horizon. It was not the Gentile gospel writer, Luke, who includes this visit as one might expect but rather Matthew, a Jewish disciple writing to a Jewish audience who sees fit to include this bizarre visit in his account of the life of Jesus.

And make no mistake, there was something extremely odd about this whole account. We have considered many elements of Jesus' birth and early life and found weird occurrences but this has to be even more puzzling than baby visiting shepherds. The easiest explanation for it is that it didn't happen at all it seems so far fetched, and none of the other gospel writers mention it but none of the others mention the shepherds either and 2 of the gospels don't bother to recount Jesus' birth at all and we don't think that he was never born! Besides, if we could conveniently remove all the bits of scripture that puzzled us, our copies of the bible would be considerably shorter and easier to read, and lacking in truth and authenticity. No, as a Christian we accept scripture as it has been received by us, but how to explain this visit logically. How does a caravan of magi find an outwardly unremarkable family, residing away from their permanent home and decide that after checking the palace of the reigning king, that this newborn was in fact the king they were looking for? It seems to be a lot of effort to go on a journey not knowing what they would find, to do no more when they got there than worship the child, leave gifts, and go home.

We don't need to understand astrology or astronomy to come to the conclusion that these men were guided somehow, through the stars, as they saw it, to visit this child. In so doing they fulfilled another prophecy, the one we heard just now from Isaiah, they will come on camels and bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord. And in bringing to fulfilment that prophesy they played their part in the beginning of God's new relationship with humanity.

St Paul bases his entire ministry on it in that passage we heard to the Ephesians, he sees his revelation of God's will to be entirely about the new relationship God has revealed with all of humanity. Paul tells us we are joint heirs, not secondary or primary but equally chosen by God as his people Israel had understood their covenant relationship to be.

And so it goes that endings and beginnings are rarely far from one another. The cycle of the year, out with the old and in with the new, the end of the Christmas festivities and the beginning of the season of Epiphany and the rest of the Church's year. Christmas is ended for another year yet we must not think of the ending of the season as the ending of the story. Epiphany begins with our new calendar year and with it comes a reminder that Christ came for each and every one of us, he fulfilled the prophecies of those who had gone before and he offers to each of us now a new and right relationship with God. At this time of New Year's resolutions will we include God in ours?