

EPIPHANY 2023

It is a lovely New Year custom I came across in a part of Bavaria (Bamberg), where the last Emeritus Pope, Benedict, was born and brought up – and who was laid to rest on the Eve of Epiphany. It is called ‘Chalking the Doors’ when, literally, nearly every household or shop would display this signage above their doors... (reveal poster).

The star represents the star of Bethlehem, the letters C, M and B stand for the Latin phrase, ‘Christus mansionem benedicat’ (May Christ bless this house). They are also the popular initials of the Three Magi: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

Cribs are big business in that part of Germany and there is definitely a strong competitive spirit about which churches and homes can build the biggest or the best! But at the heart of it all is a confidence about revealing the Christian story and sharing our catholic faith which, this ‘Theophany’ or ‘3 Kings’ Day’, enshrines and illumines.

In our Gospel of Matthew chosen for this year, we are not told their names or number or whether they are of royal blood but, instead, that ‘wise blokes’ from the East came to Jerusalem to pay homage to the Christ-child as a blessing and ‘manifestation’ to and for the world. They were not going to be deterred by the deceits and untruths of Herod (who’s motto was not so much ‘never complain, never explain’) but “**I am the one** whom you should obey and honour” – not this child-star, Jesus.

And there's the rub. We begin each New Year bombarded with sales, slimming programmes and summer holidays when actually we need to reflect on what Christmas has meant to us and the huge numbers of people joining us at St Mary's to come and worship. Is Christ still at the centre of our daily blessings at home, at work, and in our spiritual home of a living, breathing church and a loving community? Yes, it is.

We are very shy, reticent even in talking about our faith; we are sometimes very insular about the whole subject of 'mission' or even how best to teach and pass on the gift of faith to our nearest and dearest. Were not some of us brought up or told - never to mention politics or religion at the dinner table?

I do not have the authority to declare 2023 to be a 'Year of Mission' but I would like to invite you, informally, nevertheless: to see how we can make new relationships and broaden our outreach to grow the Benefice in which we live!

When did you last take part in a Lenten house group or when did you last go to a Confirmation or encourage someone to attend a special teaching course? How would you like to feel more involved in the life and witness of an ordinary parish church – to the extent that people might notice that that we are extraordinarily blessed?

I guess I am trying to say what I so often admire in other Christian friends: that it isn't overconfidence or an arrogant faith which we seek but it is still a quietly **confident** faith – which can move mountains, be a beacon to light up our

international community, and be a source too, of companionship and friendship on our journeying together. This wish or desire is not automatic, of course. Like the Magi, we have to leave our front doors behind us and go out amidst all the bustle and challenges of the everyday market place. We can't make our faith private and keep it safely locked away at home. The town, or village or city is the place where our mission resides, where we can bring blessing to those around us and the treasures of the Gospel to bear.

In the Parish Office, I often stare at this book of poetry (purchased by Simon Burridge) from one of my favourite Australian poets, Les Murray. Sadly he now recites and shares his larger than life faith with the angels, but he has left us earthlings, a huge legacy of work, an 'epiphany' by itself.

The one I have chosen for today is simply called 'Visitor' so whether your name begins with a C or M or B or another letter, the same two lines apply:

"He knocks at the door and listens to his heart approaching."

And of course, to fulfil the need to be more inclusive than woke, I would swiftly add:

"She knocks at the door and listens to her heart approaching."

All of us, whatever our age or sexuality or so-called 'status' need to think of this year of 'mission' in that humble sense of heartfelt approach. We need to grow our numbers, and our

commitment and our confidence and pray, chalk up even, our own regular 'Yes', to the God of all creation. Amen.