

During the week there was a very interesting news article on the world service. The High speed train across Germany had to be suspended for a period of time after a Swan had settled on the line just outside Fuldata in Central Germany. Police and animal control were having difficulty getting it to move off the line.

It turned out, that earlier in the month there had been two swans dangerously close to the track. Further investigation found that this lone swan was in mourning for its mate which had died having flown into overhead wires. Swans spend a time of mourning at the location of a death of a mate, and so the trains had to wait. Eventually Animal Rescue was able to successfully relocate the Swan to a nearby lake.

The Swan was trying to mark a point in time, and time that was important to it – it was not perturbed by the train schedules.

This seemed like an apt lesson in the run up to New Year, after all that 2020 has been to us – how do we mark a point in time, when there is high speed timetable in the way? How do we mark the changing of time when our traditions have been altered?

Less than 24 hours after this article I was speaking to a colleague who moved to a new parish two weeks before Christmas. The parish she has moved to is live streaming all their services, as the congregation wouldn't fit safely in the building.

After they had finished filming on Christmas Day, her colleague said to her, well we can put the crib away now, that's Christmas done with. She said but surely we will need it for our Epiphany service next week. Her colleague commented that they did not observe Epiphany and Christmas was now done. She was quite taken back – how could Christmas be over even before they sat down to lunch?

Again I wondered – how is it that we mark a point in time. Do we ponder it too long, or do we not ponder it at all??

Today, while a few days early, we mark the Feast of Epiphany. The arrival of the Magi who came to recognise and give honour to the baby Jesus. The Magi were wise people who came a great distance, and from a different culture, religion and context – and yet they came to mark the moment of Jesus birth. This marking of the Magi is even more powerful because there were local Magi – wise people – in Judea. In fact, the Magi visit them and consult with them on their way to find Jesus. This is how Herod becomes aware of their journey.

It is not that the local Magi did not see the signs, rather they chose not to accept what the signs were telling them, or maybe they were frightened of what they thought they might mean. Whatever their reasons, it was those from afar – strangers to the context who help mark the moment and significance of Jesus birth.

Epiphany is often referred to as a festival of light – but more importantly it is a time for us to reflect on how we see God in our midst – marking the moment that God is manifest to humanity, or how God is shown to each of us and those who are around us. As we mark Epiphany with the placing of the Magi in the crib – Epiphany in a liturgical sense marks that moment when God revealed himself to the world through the incarnation of Jesus. And it is a moment when we are invited to mark this in the way that we live.

This season of Epiphany is a time when we can explore what it means to live as a people who truly do believe ‘God is with us!’ To consider, how do we mark that God is part of our lives and our choices.

Matthew’s gospel invites us to consider how we how we encounter God through the arrival of the Magi. What moves us to faith? If in the Epiphany God is manifest to all humanity – where and when did we experience this?

One of the reasons that the story of the Magi is so important – the story of the Magi reaches beyond one group or class of people, it even reaches beyond one experience. In Matthew’s version of the birth of Jesus there is no crib scene, in a sense no nativity, BUT immediately after the angel appears to Joseph, we hear that Joseph does all that he should and Jesus is born, and then we hear of the arrival of the Magi.

God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God’s own people in through visitors from the East.

Why is this important? Well God uses what is necessary to help us encounter the presence of God. It is up to us then to notice and mark these moments in the choices we make. Amidst all the symbolism of the Magi’s arrival, and the gifts that are presented, God is made known to us, wherever we are in time and space!

This New Year, when we have been asked to celebrate alone has made me think a lot about how we mark the passing of time. What things in my life are important to mark, and what things just pass by, or do I pack away before I have fully enjoyed and honoured them.

So often, the ‘God moments’ of life get packed away a little too quickly. It has made me think about the times this year I have been aware of God’s presence and how I want to mark that. There was the rainbow over the cemetery at the end of a day that had felt hopeless. There were texts or phone calls at just the moment I needed them. There was support and strength from the communities of which I am part – including this one. There were the days when tears seemed to be the only answer.

The joy of the story of epiphany is that God is marked in our lives by unexpected people, and at unexpected moments – and to be honest I am not sure that much has changed.

As the church, we need to be encouraging everyone to hear the voice that calls them forth into all they are created to be, and to notice our daily encounters with God. This is the value of spiritual direction or having someone who shares our Christian journey with us – someone who helps us discern what God is saying to us and to our lives. Someone who helps us mark out the points so we can see the embrace of God.

As a Christian community we have a responsibility to nurture one another in faith and up hold one another in prayer, and to help each other mark significant moments – even when they may be hard to see. That is the gift of Epiphany, and it’s a practice we invited to take into this New Year with us.

**Amen.**