

REFLECTION FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY
with reference to Matthew 2: 1-15a

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I had already decided to focus on Epiphany today when events began to unfold as they did in and around the Capitol Building in Washington DC on Wednesday, Epiphany itself.

At that point it became tempting to focus on stories of fearful, insecure rulers, willing to stoop incredibly low and use any means necessary to hold onto their respective positions of power. But that had never been my intention. I hadn't wanted to hold onto the Christmas story for a while longer in order to enter into its darker side. Though there are good arguments for 'putting Herod back into Christmas' - to borrow a phrase coined by Anglican priest, Joy Carroll - I'm not sure that we need any more darkness in our lives at the moment. We've all spoken a lot in recent weeks and days about vaccines providing light at the end of the tunnel, but we've spent a heck of a long time in that tunnel already and even now only seem to be entering its darkest point. So, I've resisted that temptation and there'll be no drawn-out Herod/Trump comparisons today - though feel free to play that game in your own time.

In truth, I decided to focus on Epiphany today after I heard an historian from English Heritage interviewed on Radio 4's Today programme on Tuesday morning. He said that, after an especially tough year, we should all leave our Christmas decorations up for a good while longer. He argued that January is often colder and darker than December (so we need more cheer than anyway) and claimed that the tradition that it's bad luck to keep decorations up after Twelfth Night is a relatively modern invention and that there's plenty of evidence to suggest that in medieval times decorations would remain until Candlemas (40 days after Christmas and falling on 2nd February). I liked the idea so, although our now brittle Christmas tree lies on the front lawn ready to go to recycling heaven, the star lights in our front windows will remain for some time to come. I hope that they do indeed bring some cheer to those who pass by. It's working for me.

But even if you don't choose to do the same, and your decorations are already back in a cupboard or in the loft, we can all hold onto the stories of the Magi and the Holy Family for a while longer this year. That too feels important. We need help and no little encouragement if we're to hold onto the light that shines even at the heart of the darkness. And these stories might just offer us both of these things.

The Magi stared into the heart of a dark, night sky until they found a glimmer of light that spoke to them of promise. They then journeyed for who knows

how long, for who knows how many miles or long days and nights, with nothing to guide them but that light - and of course the hope and conviction that it was worth holding onto, worth journeying towards. And when they lost their way or mistakenly assumed that they knew where it was leading them - and perhaps had temporarily lost sight of the light itself - they were persistent enough, willing enough, humble enough, to seek assistance, to open themselves to the insights of others, to place themselves before the powers that be, even though doing so took them into the heart of a different kind of darkness. Later, having located and paid homage to the one to whom the light had led them, and discovered him to be an even greater source of light than the one that they'd followed, they were - on the back of a foreboding dream - willing to return by another, maybe longer road, in order to prevent that light from being extinguished.

And then there's Mary and Joseph, their lives already turned upside down, who heed an angelic message to flee to Egypt and make their home there. Egypt - the land in which their forebears had been held captive as slaves. Egypt - the heart of darkness in their nation's story. And yet they're prepared to go there and put their own lives - and hopes and dreams - on hold to protect their child, to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable one in their care until such time as the threat has passed.

Once again, I'll resist the temptation to draw too many direct comparisons between these stories and our own. But this time it's because I don't think I need to. These are stories that speak for themselves. They are stories of light shining in the heart of the darkness and of the darkness not overcoming it. They are stories of human courage, determination, resolve, patience, persistence in the face of adversity and an existential threat. Whatever we each make of them, they are stories well worth hanging onto long after the decorations have come down, whenever that might be.