

The feast of Epiphany, January 4th 2015.

Vicar Joyce.

Isaiah 60: 1-6, Ephesians 3: 1-12, Matthew 2: 1-12

Some will know that this week we have been in Nelson attending and helping with my brother Keith's funeral. Keith was a man of the country, loving bush and trees and hospitality. The flowers on his casket were gathered from the bush - a mix of ferns, flowering native trees and pine cones. People could put a small stone on his coffin at the hearse or red petals. He had worked out that 250 people were regularly praying for him, including our Wednesday congregation and he had been kept alive by blood transfusions for 15 months, which he found very reassuring and for which he was very grateful.

Two local Maori leaders began the service, giving thanks for his stewardship of his land, his sensitivity towards the Tangata Whenua and his generosity, sharing native timber around Nelson and Marlborough for various public carvings and for the restoration of historic churches. This bicultural aspect added to the depth of the worship. Thank you for your thoughts and prayers over recent times.

I wonder what has happened to you this Christmas. Have new understandings of faith or family or the world come to you?

'Epiphany' means a manifestation or revelation or the appearance of a divine being or the discovery of new understanding. 'Aha' moments are epiphanies.

Often it is like the breaking down of walls; the end of hostilities. One Epiphany theme would be that God's love has no boundaries.

The early Church developed three festivals. Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost. Christmas was celebrated as a fourth festival later. The magi with joy in their hearts came to worship the Christ child.

Mary and Joseph stayed around Bethlehem to allow Mary to recover from the birth.

'Herod the Great' brought peace, built the temple and was sometimes generous. Roman leaders set him over Judea even though he had little Jewish background, but he was cruelly paranoid over rivals, real and imagined and murdered three of his sons, his wife and his mother.

The visitors, the magi, went to Jerusalem to enquire where the star was leading them. They were astrologers, astronomers and philosophers, had studied at the universities of the time and may have been kings or priests from the East. Matthew has the story of the Gentiles coming to worship Jesus at the beginning of the gospel and at the end of the gospel the believers were told to go to all nations spreading the news of Christ. The message was that the Gentiles were equally loved by God. In the temple there was a wall beyond which non-Jews could not go. The Christian message was for everyone. Love without walls.

Herod sought advice re the prophecy of the scripture and pretended to want to know about the birth of the new king. Such was his wickedness that all Jerusalem shuddered. What would he do now?

The visitors were able to meet Jesus, worship him and give him gifts. The gifts were most suitable for the holy family as they made a rushed trip to Egypt for their safety. Gold was immediate money; Frankincense was used for worship and myrrh for anointing, so both could be sold when financial support was needed. We sometimes think that the gifts were not practical, but they did help the special family. The wise ones were warned not to return to Herod, who may well have murdered them also, but returned home by 'another way'. Interestingly, the Greek word used here is the same as that used of Jesus when he described himself as, 'the way, the truth and the life'.

They arrived by their learning and returned by their faith.

Herod's slaughter of the male Bethlehem babies reminds us of similar cruelty in Egypt centuries earlier when Moses was saved. Such behaviour in the Arab world still continues at times.

The visit of the magi must be one of the most well-known visits. I want to read to you from a writing by Crawford Murray, who was vicar of Fendalton, about the visit.