

EPIPHANY

Year B

Isn't it extraordinary how many messages and invitations come pouring through our televisions, radios, telephones, emails and letterboxes? We call it "junk mail". Most of it is of no value at all. We don't need what is being offered. But it isn't always easy to see that. Who hasn't been tempted by some gadget or other, bought it – and then discovered it doesn't work, or it is never used? But simply chucking this sort of thing in the bin is hard to do, too. It might be useful "one day".... There just might be a nugget of gold in there, somewhere. And sometimes, pure gold turns up in the most unlikely places. I saw a brochure that advertises T-shirts. Each shirt has a message on it, some funny, some that seem offensive. One T-shirt in the brochure reads: *Jesus loves you! But I'm his favourite*". Of course that T-shirt is meant to poke gentle fun at Christians. Yet how often do we actually behave as if, somehow, we are more special than others? As if we are God's favourites?

The readings today challenge the ironic message on that T-shirt. The passages from Isaiah and from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians remind us of two things: that God calls us to the glory of his loving presence – and it is not just us that he calls, but everyone, from all the nations of the earth. We are all equal in God's eyes. This message is reinforced by the Gospel story of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus. This story is so familiar that we take it for granted. It's hard to see much relevance for our own lives, but it can speak to us if we think afresh.

God calls us to his loving presence. The wise men felt the call of God so strongly that they set out to find the newborn Christ. It's easy to forget how hard that journey must have been: no plane to carry them there, no trains, no cars, no package tours to the Holy Land; just a long, hard slog with no map, nothing to guide them but a star and the hope that they would find God. What an extraordinary act of faith and commitment it must have been, to set out on such a journey.

Even more amazing than the faith of the wise men in setting out on this journey is the fact that they actually found Jesus. They were looking for a king and found an earthly king in Herod. As we find out later in the story, Herod is no wonder-counsellor but a cruel despot. The slaughter of all boys under two in Bethlehem showed his need to hang on to power at all costs. But the wise men were wise enough to look beyond the obvious, beyond palaces and thrones. They were wise enough to recognize the presence of God in a baby in humble surroundings. They worshipped him as a king despite lowly appearances. God can call us to unexpected places.

These men were not the obvious people to find the promised Messiah. They came from far away, not from Judaea, the land expecting the arrival of the Messiah. In fact, the people in Judaea, the ones best placed to respond to this gift from God, were too obsessed with their own privileged situation to see Jesus as anything but a dangerous rival. The massacre of the innocents is only the

first act of aggression against the threat Jesus posed to the powers in Judaea. His crucifixion would be the ultimate act, attempting to obliterate the truth. The response to God's call is not always strongest where it is most obvious.

The feast of Epiphany reminds us of the wonderful truth that God's love is there for us, if we open our hearts to it. That truly is something to celebrate and delight in: a message that ought to stand out from all the distractions and noise of the world.

But it also challenges us: to be wise enough to find God in the most unlikely places; and truly to know that others are as precious to God as we are, however different from us they may seem, however far outside our inner circle. And that is a challenge worth taking seriously.