

### **Third Sunday of Advent**

This year I got my Christmas cards written early, having started to address the envelopes on the last weekend in September. To friends I have not seen in some time I always add a note in my increasingly illegible handwriting. So, the whole exercise takes time and concentration, but it is worth it. Given that I did start so early, my cards are now virtually all posted. In the UK I can benefit too from 2<sup>nd</sup> class post in the assurance that my cards will still land on their recipients' doormat well in advance of 25 xii. The main advantage with this advanced planning strategy was that I can now sit down and open the cards I receive with leisure, read whatever messages they contain and, above all, look at the image on the card.

Given that our Advent Course has been focusing on the three most painted scenes in the Nativity story, I am even more attentive this year than I may have been in the past. I firmly believe that our cards are not only colourful and decorative, they convey a message and display a great deal of thought on the part of the artist. I like to think too that the relative or friend who sent me a card has chosen it as his/her *signature* card for Christmas 2018. For years now I have been ordering a batch of identical cards so that everyone who hears from me on the occasion of Christmas sees the same artist's take on the Nativity story. This year, given my particular liking for Flemish art - I recognise the faces of my Flemish friends in the features of the shepherds, the Magi, Joseph and Mary, and the incidental characters - I have chosen the *Visit of the Magi* by Rogier van der Weyden from the Columba Altarpiece, conserved in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. I know in advance that my friends in Belgium will be particularly happy to receive this card, but my other friends too cannot but be moved by this sumptuous and prayerful presentation of that great story recounted to us in Mt. 2, 1 - 12.

What lesson do I draw from this painting, why have I deliberately chosen it so share with my family and friends this Christmas? I always like the story of the Magi because I feel that visiting friends, relatives and - for a parish priest this is a particular duty and pleasure - calling to see people who live alone or are confined to their homes is a central part of Christmas. I have lively memories of my father in the ten days before Christmas buying bunches of flowers and driving to visit elderly ladies whom he knew and, particularly, those who had never married or lived alone. The three wise men came to visit the new-born King, and they did not arrive in Bethlehem empty-handed. I often think of the joy this unexpected visit must have brought to Mary and Joseph, and how their experience of discovering and then beholding the King changed their lives. In a much humbler way and in a less exotic setting, a visit by us to a friend or neighbour may well change their lives. Or in fact ours. After all, having seen Jesus, the wise men went home by a different route.

**Father Patrick**