

## Solemnity of the Epiphany

Dear Parishioners,

I started setting out my Christmas cards on 17 December as of the moment when the Church told me it was now legitimate to put the Lord's "second coming", and apprehensive reflection on it, on ice until Advent next year and focus all my attention on the mystery of the Nativity itself. I already had a stack in the waiting bay on the 17<sup>th</sup> but then each day the collection was added to around noon when the postman called. As I mentioned last week, I studied each card closely, selected an appropriate spot for it and reflected on the way *this particular card* translated whichever of the three mysteries of Christmas it was depicting. But once the postman stopped knocking I started, as of the Christmas Eve broadcast from Cambridge of the Nine Lessons and Carols, listening more attentively to Christmas carols, cantatas and Christmas songs, largely thanks to a small CD hi-fi unit I have installed in the kitchen since the beginning of December. I listened to José Feliciano sing *Feliz Navidad*, the spoiled Eartha Kitt crooning *Santa Baby* with whom she shares her wish-list, and then as *Silvesterabend* (31 xii) approached, I turned to a bunch of Swedish singers to put me in the mood with *Happy New Year*.

But those songs were as much concession as I made to the secular celebration of what we are now increasingly calling *the Holidays*. I had Bach in the kitchen, *Messiah*, and lots of carols. I decided I would pay attention to the lyrics. I followed the Christmas cantatas of J.S. Bach with the help of a dog-eared volume of the cantata texts, the words of *Messiah* I kind of know, and the lyrics of most Christmas carols emerge from my subconscious, planted as they were there so effectively by the Mercy Nuns at the *Scoil Fatima* of my childhood. What struck me is just how much theology those carols contain: *he came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all*; and in the Advent Course we had focused on the mystery of the Incarnation, of God in Jesus becoming *totally human*, like us; *and he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness* (Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander + 1895). Or a carol attributed – albeit dubiously – to Martin Luther: *[Jesus] leaves all his glory behind, to be born and to die for mankind*. Or the most tender articulation of the Johannine conviction that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us: *no ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, the dear Christ enters in.* (Phillips Brooks + 1893). So much of what we know of the significance and meaning of the Christmas story, our theological understanding of God's life as mediated through what occurred in Bethlehem in that dark midwinter two thousand years ago, our spiritual integration of all the *dramatis personae* of the Nativity narrative, have come to us through the carols we sing, or go to listen to at Carol services, or hear involuntarily – as I did in Paddington Station four days before Christmas – as they come at us across tannoys in supermarkets, shopping malls or, as was the case with me, the forecourt of the Tube station. They all announce that Christ, the Saviour, was born. Carols *evangelise*, carols spread the *good news*.

**Father Patrick**