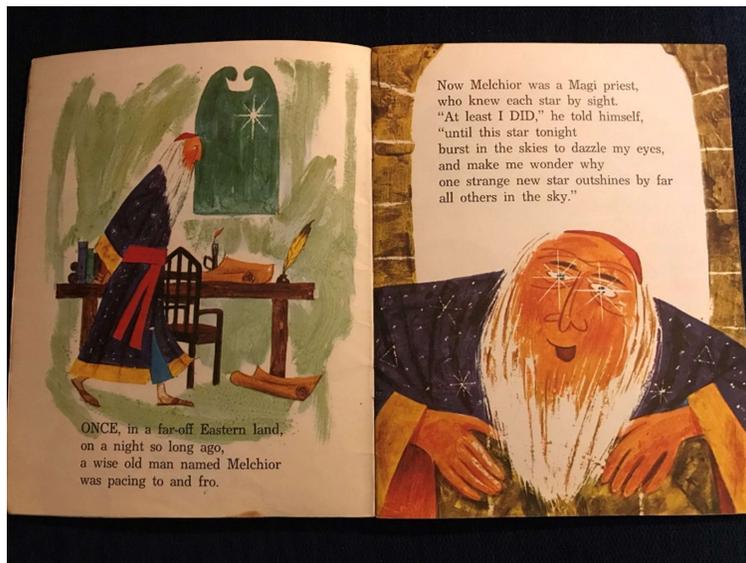


SERMON – EPIPHANY

I like Epiphany. I like it most when we can celebrate it on the right day. When we come together in the evening, to a church still a blaze of light and decorations for Christmas. When we can have Peter Cornelius' The Three Kings, our favourite carols – tum ti, tum ti, tiddly tum – and a celebration with a glass and cake afterwards. In Bury Cathedral we used to have the service up in the Quire and, during it, process down the Nave to the crib scene, which was set up at the west end by the main door. There, amidst clouds of incense, we used offer gold, frankincense and myrrh – I've probably told you the story of the year a new Dean decreed, about ten minutes before the service started, that the gold painted box we had always used was not good enough and he wanted real gold. Fortunately the Head Verger had patience enough not to tell the Dean what to do with his box, but to smile sweetly, unlock the Treasury, take the alarm system off the cabinets, find some gold. Let the Dean present it at the Crib, and whip it back to the locked, alarm case, as quickly as possible!



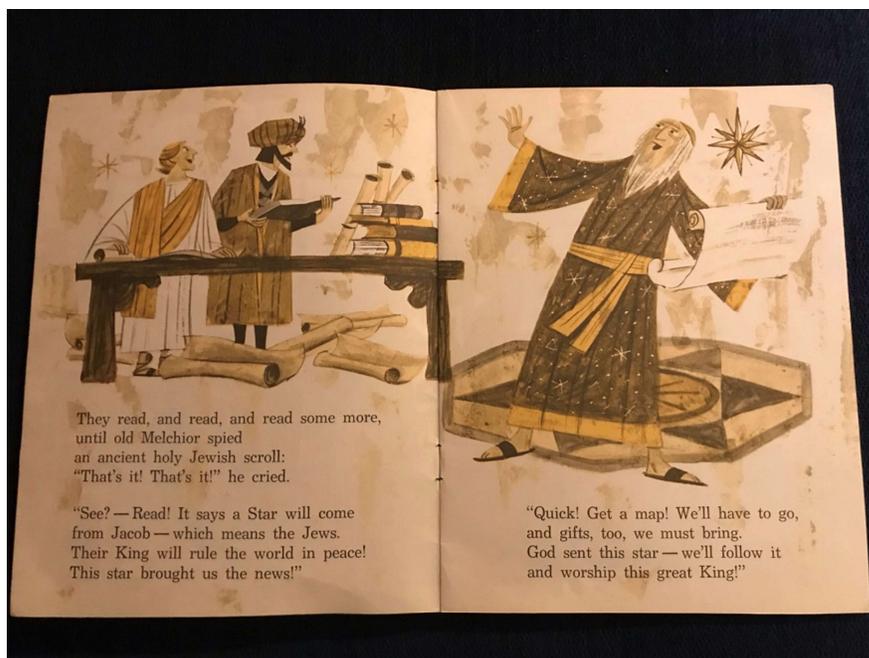
I think my love of Epiphany goes back to the Arch book which I had as a child. There was a whole series of bible stories in this form, written in poetry (not always good poetry it has to be admitted) and well illustrated.



Never did I envisage I would have a beard as white as Melchior's. He sees the star, and he calls his friends to help him work it out.



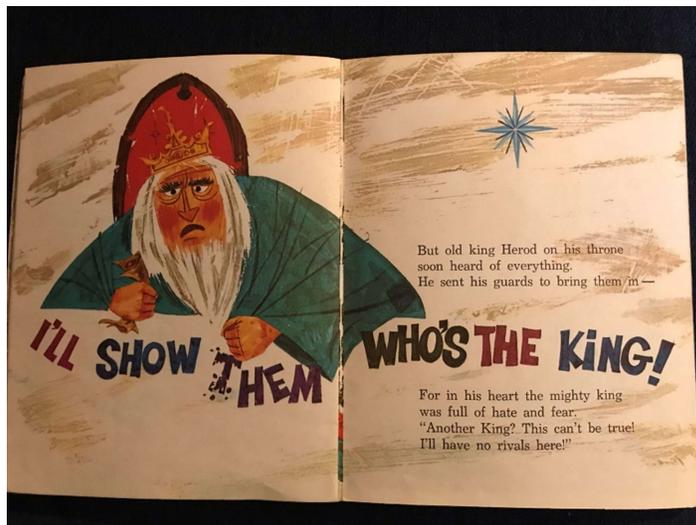
I love the idea of them coming from across the world – the geographer in me.



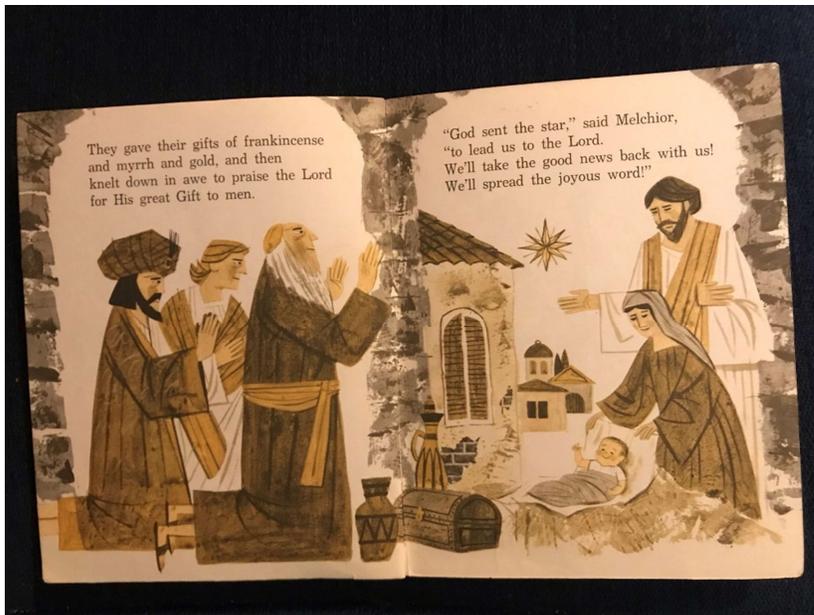
I love the idea of books and study – the librarian in me!



Off they travel – I love this camel.



When they get to Jerusalem and meet King Herod – “I’ll show them who’s the King!” was what me and my brother Dave would shout as mum read us this story.



Then the gifts – no, it's not brilliant poetry, and we wouldn't write "Gift to men" – and baby Jesus is very white, Anglo-Saxon, but it's a great story!

At the start of this new year – the Wise Men, the Kings, the Magi, they have a lot to teach us.

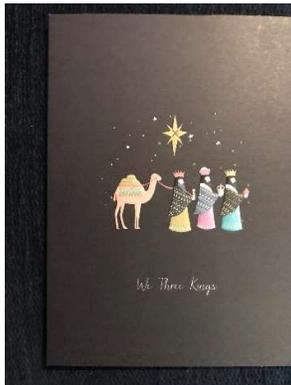
Wisdom – follow the science. Do your research, listen to wise men and women. We're still not good at that. If I mentioned the name "Professor Sarah Gilbert" to you, can anyone tell me who she is? The professor who led the team that have produced the Oxford Vaccine.



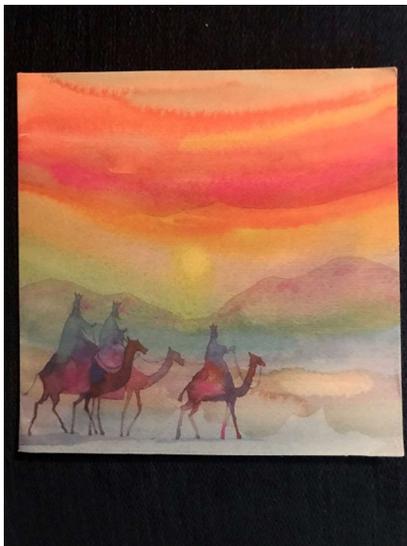
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55043551>

It also amused me that she did her doctorate at the University of Hull – do you remember that Blackadder line about the three great Universities – Oxford, Cambridge and Hull?

In 2021 we also need to pray for wisdom for our leaders, Kings, politicians – if country's truly get the politicians we deserve, that says something about all of us. We need wise, sensible people engaged in politics – and in the Church of England are we now so focussed in on ourselves, we have lost our role in Society, bringing people together, facilitating debate and discussion, simply building trust – and that is something we have got to rebuild in this new year.



We also need to be a worldwide church and a worldwide community in 2021. Melchior, Casper and Balthazar are the foreigners, the travellers, the world coming to Bethlehem. Britain (or to be precise, England) is not the only country closing in on itself – most of us humans prefer to stick with people like us. The Church of England has an appalling record in welcoming – may God forgive us.



One of the great things about the last few months has been the time and computer ability to make, and re-make, contacts. There's about 300 people a day who read my facebook ramblings – from across the world. It's meant that we've remade contacts from our past – this Christmas card came from a lass called Nicky who was a year below me at Lincoln Theological College. She was a single student, and often came as a babysitter, or to have a day out with us. But we started work in Suffolk, a year later she went to Diocese of Bath and

Wells – and they’re a long way apart, and we lost touch. Facebook has got us back together – and as she’s now not far from the West Somerset Railway, I know one old friend we are visiting in 2021!

I’m also going to let this card stand for the beauty of the world, seeing God in creation, looking for the signs – Covid may have knocked green issues off the agenda, but 2021 has got to be a year, the year, when we get to grip with caring for this planet of ours’, this gift that God has given us.



A baby at Bethlehem is not just a sweet nativity, a lovely scene to be enjoyed at Christmas. This child is God with us – the light in the darkness, the power to fight that darkness, the wisdom and the inspiration to make a better world. He is also the source of our optimism – we don’t put our faith in vaccines, or in politicians, or in some gormless phrase - “Building back better” or whatever the slogan is this week. We put our faith in Jesus – gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh to anoint his body. In light and darkness, joy and pain, life and death, crucifixion and resurrection, the old year and the new – Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

Peter Barham, 2 January 2021