

Epiphany 2019

On New Year's Day we saw the first fuzzy pictures of the rocky mini-planet Ultima Thule transmitted from the space probe New Horizons. It was a remarkable achievement! Not only did it involve a journey of 4 billion miles over a number of years but Ultima Thule itself was not discovered until after the probe had sent back its photos of Pluto. NASA had to programme the probe to guide it to its new objective. They also had to come to terms with the fact that Pluto was not the cold dead planet they had expected but alive with seismic activity. Much closer to home the Chinese landed a probe on the far side of the moon on Thursday.

The stars have always fascinated human beings. I remember as a ten year old the excitement of being taken to the newly opened London Planetarium next to Madam Tussaud's. This used a mechanical optical projector to display the night sky anywhere in the world and at any time in history – something that can be done today by computer programmes. 3000 years ago the Chinese and Babylonians were able to calculate their movements and to predict eclipses. They may have interpreted them differently to today's scientists but they saw them as a source of knowledge and way of understanding the Universe. Scholars both of the bible and astronomy have come up with many different explanations of what the wise men saw 2000 years ago. Some see the star as a purely mystical experience undergone by the wise men. Others look for a natural phenomenon such as a comet or conjunction of bright stars so that they appear as one body. They have also come up with explanations as to how such an object can appear to halt or go backwards. They all have difficulties, particularly in reconciling the date with those given by Matthew or Luke in the Gospels.

However we may explain what they saw, for them it triggered a search for knowledge and understanding of what it signified. For the wise men and most of their contemporaries unusual events in the heavens reflected or even caused unusual events on earth – there was no disconnect between the heavens and the earth. They understood the new star to signify the birth of a new king and from its location that this was a new king in Israel. Given the perennial political sensitivity of the Middle East this could have all sorts of implications. They set out with precious gifts not really knowing what to expect. However, their knowledge can only take them so far. They need more detailed guidance on the ground and are astonished when they arrive at Herod's court to find that no one is aware of what has happened. They must rely on the advice of the Scripture scholars and set out in faith for Bethlehem. They are not disappointed. The star reappears and they find the child in the stable with his mother Mary and St Joseph. This is not at all what they expected – an ordinary looking child in a poor setting – but the grace of God enables them to see beneath the surface. Here indeed is one who will be King and not only a human king but one who is already a manifestation of God. This is acknowledged by their gifts of gold and frankincense. Myrrh too was a precious spice. We do not know whether they had intimations of the Passion but this gift too was part of God's unfolding of his plan.

Their personal mission is accomplished and they return home but their mission as witnesses has just begun and will continue to resound throughout history. God has taken human nature to himself so that we might be united with God both in this life and for eternity. He comes to transform the world by love and to reign over human hearts as King. We ask him to bless our homes and lives in the year ahead so that we too may recognise and bear witness to his Kingship.