In today’s feast, we see the same recently born baby in similar circumstances but the material and social surroundings are hardly touched on. The emphasis here, as we shall see, is different. Here are strangers, foreigners, total outsiders coming to give royal homage to this tiny child. This will be the theme of Matthew’s Gospel. “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations.”

The third manifestation we will celebrate next Sunday and it closes the Christmas celebration of the Incarnation. Jesus, now an adult of 30 years or so, is seen standing in a river together with a multitude of penitents. He is solemnly endorsed by the voice of God as the Son of God. “This is my dear Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This event is recorded by all the evangelists.

The fourth ‘revelation’ is found only in John’s gospel. It is not part of the Christmas liturgy but we read it on the Second Sunday of the Year in the Year C, immediately after the Christmas season. This revelation occurs during a wedding banquet (symbolizing the Kingdom of love, justice and peace which is to be established through Jesus). Water (symbolizing the Old Covenant) is changed into new wine (symbolizing the New Covenant to be signed and sealed on the cross of Calvary). Mary (representing the Church, God’s people) is seen as the intermediary through whose request this is brought about. It is the first of seven ‘signs’ by which Jesus reveals his true identity in John’s gospel.

Coming back to today’s feast, we may ask is the story of the “wise men” a factual report or is it just that – a story? Primarily, it is a story. A report is concerned with hard facts – the temperature dropped to 10 degrees last night or there were 10 millimetres of rain yesterday. But a story, especially a biblical story, is concerned much more with meaning. In reading any Scripture story, including Gospel stories, we should not be asking, “Did it really happen like that?” Instead, we should be asking, “What does it mean? What is it saying to us?” The truth of the story is in its meaning and not in the related facts.

Certainly in this story the facts are extremely vague and not at all sufficient for a newspaper or TV news report. The standard questions a newspaper reporter is expected to be able to answer are: Who? What? Why? When? Where? How? In this story it is difficult to give satisfactory answers to these questions.
Although Jesus is still an infant and still in Bethlehem, we do not know how long after his birth, this incident is supposed to have taken place. We are not told because it does not matter; it is not relevant to the meaning of the story. (Compared to Mark, Matthew is normally notoriously short on details.)

Who were these “wise men” and where did they come from? In the Greek text they are called magoi (magoi) which is usually rendered in English as “Magi”. Magi were a group or caste of scholars who were associated with the interpretation of dreams, Zoroastrianism, astrology and magic (hence the name ‘Magi’). In later Christian tradition they were called kings (“We three kings of Orient are…”) under the influence of Psalm 72:10 (“May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!”), Isaiah 49:7 (“Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves”) and Isaiah 60:10 (“Their kings shall minister to you”).

We are not told what their names were or how many of them there were. Tradition settled on three, presumably because there were three kinds of gifts. And they were also given names – Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. Caspar was represented as black and thus they were understood to represent the whole non-Jewish, Gentile world which came to Christ.

We are told, too, that they came “from the east”. This could be Persia, East Syria or Arabia – or indeed any distant place. The Asian theologian, Fr Aloysius Pieris, points out the significance for Asians that it was wise men from the East and not the local wise men who recognised the light that led to Jesus*.

There is talk of following a star. Was there indeed at this time a comet or supernova or some significant conjunction of planets which would be particularly meaningful to these men? Even so, how does one follow a star? Have you ever tried? How do you know when a star is “over the place” you are looking for? You could travel several hundred miles and the star could still be “over” you. Probably, we are wasting our time looking for some significant stellar happening. The star is rather to be seen as a symbol: a light representing Jesus as the Light of the whole world.

There really is not much point in trying to pinpoint facts here. We are dealing here with meaning and the meaning is very clear from the general context of Matthew’s Gospel. God, in the person of Jesus, is reaching out to the whole world. More than that, the religious leaders of his own people – the chief priests and experts in the scriptures, although clearly aware of where the Messiah would be born, made no effort whatsoever to investigate. Yet Bethlehem was “just down the road”, so to speak, from Jerusalem.
King Herod, an ambitious and ruthless man (that is a fact of history), was prepared to go but only to wipe out even the remotest threat to his own position. These pagan foreigners, on the other hand, went to great lengths to find the “King of the Jews” and “do him homage”.

As part of that homage they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts seem inspired by Isaiah 60:6 quoted in today’s First Reading, “They shall bring gold and frankincense”. In later tradition, the gold came to symbolize the kingship of Christ, the incense, his divine nature, and the myrrh his redemptive suffering and death. They also came to signify virtue, prayer and suffering.

All in all, today’s feast is telling us that for God there are no foreigners, no outsiders. From his point of view, all are equally his beloved children. We all, whatever external physical or cultural differences there may be between us, belong to one single family which has one Father, “our” Father. It means that every one of us is a brother and sister to everyone else. There is no room for discrimination of any kind based on nationality, race, religion, class or occupation. There cannot be a single exception to this position.

The facts of today’s story may be vague but the message is loud and clear. We thank God today that there is no “Chosen People” whether they be Jews or Christians (or even Catholics). Let us try to understand more deeply God’s closeness to us which is also a reason for us to be close to each other. There are no outsiders. All are called – be it the Mother of Jesus, the rich and the poor, the privileged and the lonely, the healthy and the sick, the saints and the sinners.

Yet, we can become outsiders. We do that every time we make someone else an outsider, whether we do that individually, as a family, a community, or an ethnic grouping. To make even a single other person an outsider, that is, to deny them the love and respect which belongs equally to all, is to make an outsider of oneself. It is to join the ranks of the Pharisees, the chief priests and every other practitioner of bigotry.

Finally, we might ask ourselves, What are the stars in my life? The wise men saw the star and followed it. The people in Jerusalem did not. How and to what is God calling me at this time? Where does he want me to find him, to serve and follow him? Some have their priorities already fixed and so have stopped or have never even started to look for the real priorities, the God-sent stars in their lives. That is like first making a right turn at a crossroads and then wondering where you should be going. Saint Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises speaks of people who get married first and then ask, “What does God want me to do?
This very day, let us stop in our tracks. Obviously, at this stage there are many things which, for better or worse, we cannot change, some decisions, right or wrong, which cannot now be undone. But it is not too late to look for our star and begin following it from where we are now.

The wise men did not know where the star would lead them. They just followed it until it brought them to Bethlehem – and to Jesus. They never, I am sure, regretted their decision. If we can only have the courage and the trust to follow their example, I doubt if we will have regrets either. If we have not already done so, today is the day to make that start.