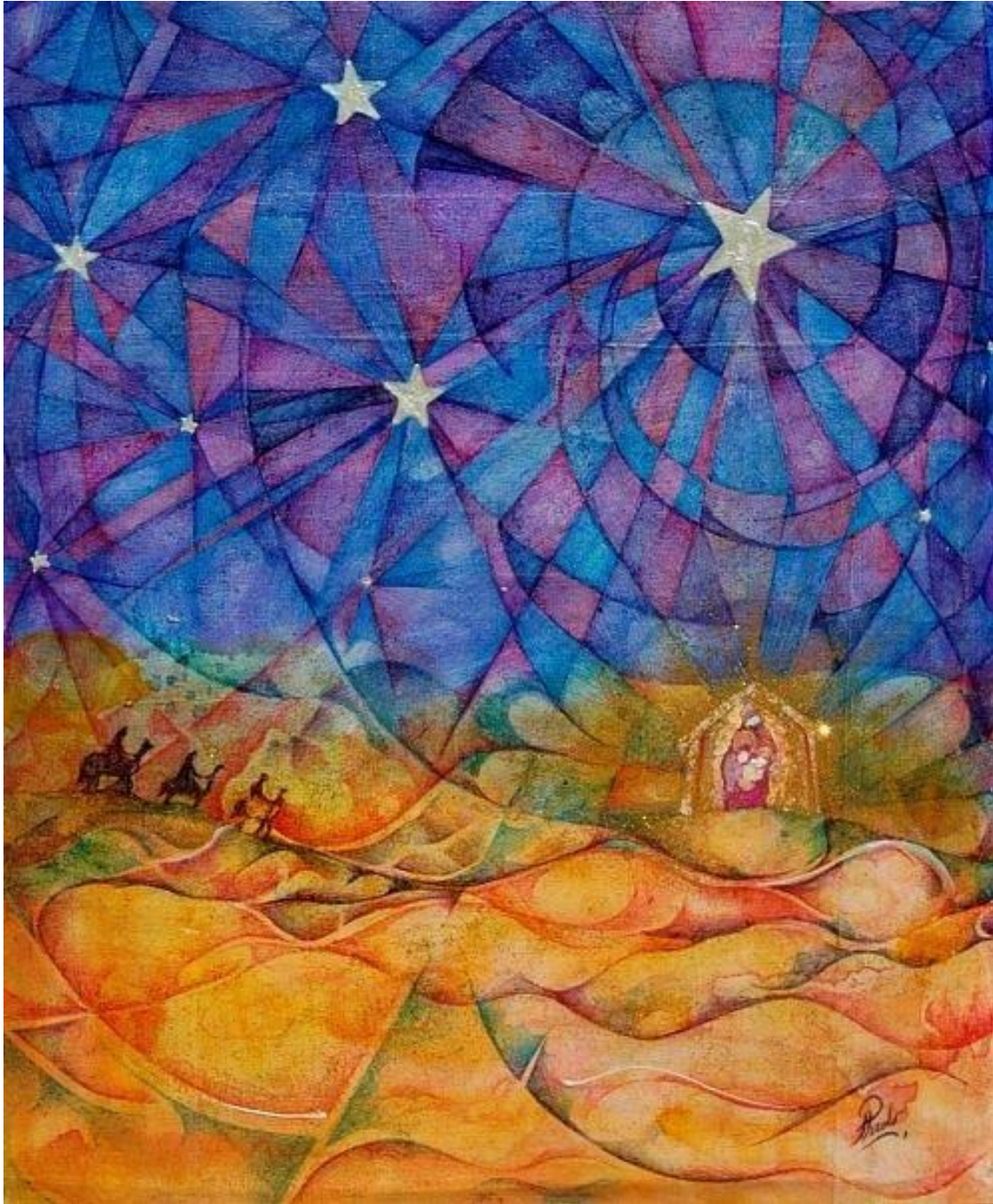


BUF NEWS January 2023



"Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world."
John Milton

Important Notice

Because of problems with dates and potential travel difficulties there will be *no meeting in January*

Reflection

I hope you all had an enjoyable Christmas, however you spent the special day. It's the one day in the year when, even in a secularised, post-Christian society like ours, almost everything stops. Then, gradually, life gets "back to normal" again. Now the children are back at school, the shops are fully open, the trains are running (or not), and the bewildering succession of public holidays is on pause until Easter.

Meanwhile we have celebrated the arrival of a New Year. I'm sure many of us were glad to see the back of 2022, but I wonder how many of us have misgivings about the prospects for 2023. Sometimes nothing much seems to change but the date.

That's the festive season over for another year, then. Or is it? What about the Feast of the Epiphany, held on 6 January, the final act of the Nativity story, and celebrated in Eastern Christianity (and some western Catholic countries) as the main present-giving climax of the festivities?

In our UK culture we have condensed the Nativity Story into a single narrative. The birth of Jesus is accompanied by the arrival of shepherds and wise men in one event. It must have been very crowded in the humble stable where Jesus was born, and the resident animals must have wondered what had hit them, but somehow we have fitted it all together for a catch-all occasion commemorated on Christmas Day. But it was not always thus. There used to be twelve days of Christmas, not just one. Beginning on Christmas Eve and ending on 6 January: from the arrival in Bethlehem to the ultimate recognition of the Christ Child by the Wise Men. Apart from extra days of festivity, what have we lost (if anything) by our modern lack of a separate emphasis on the Epiphany?

Epiphany means recognition, realisation, manifestation. In this instance it is the revelation that God is in humanity, manifest in Jesus, recognised by the wise men from the east. What does it say to us, today, that God is present in humanity, rather than being in some remote sphere that even our best technology cannot reach? That all of us can access God through our limited, flawed, human selves? That God is within us if only we knew it?

I can't answer those questions, I can only express wonder and gratitude for the mystery of God in my life. But I do know that once epiphany is experienced, nothing can ever go "back to normal" again.

Kay

“A Cold Coming”

Our December meeting followed a week of snow and low temperatures, but by that Sunday Wiltshire and Bath were sufficiently clear for travel, although Gloucestershire was still icy. Traditionally our Advent Service is a celebration for our young people, led by Peter. This year Andrew showed them how to make Christingles, we retold the Nativity Story from a modern perspective, and there was an emphasis on giving. There was a substantial collection of gifts brought to the “stable” for the local food bank, and £72.60 was raised for the GA’s appeal for Ukraine (the total is a little odd because it includes pocket money). After worship there was a visit from Santa, who distributed gifts to the children. Peter had gone to investigate a roof leak in an outhouse, so unfortunately missed all the fun, which included a spirited rendering of “when Santa got stuck up the chimney.” Finally the Christingles were lit and gave us all a sense that Christmas was just around the corner.



The Christingle symbolises the world, with its compass points, and a candle to represent Jesus as the light of the world.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Wise Men are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To welcome the stranger
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among the people
To make music in the heart

Howard Thurman

The Unitarian General Assembly 2023

The 2023 Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches will be held at [Staverton Park Hotel and Golf Club](#) in Northamptonshire on 4-6 April 2023. Registration is now open – go to <https://www.unitarian.org.uk/annualmeetings/>

A January Date to Remember

Martin Luther King Day will be celebrated this year on Monday 16 January in the USA and is a time to reflect on race relations throughout the world.

Chinese New Year

This year the Chinese New Year occurs on 22 January. If you want to find your Chinese zodiac animal for your birth year, go to <https://www.today.com/parents/chinese-zodiac-signs-years-meanings-explained-t241535>. I was born in the Year of the Tiger, but as we all know I'm just a pussy-cat, who purrs when stroked and likes to curl up in the middle of the duvet. Have fun!

BUF Reconvenes

Our next meeting will take place at Barrow Castle on **Sunday 26 February**, when Peter will lead worship on the subject of beauty as a spiritual gateway.

And Finally

Bless our winter rest. Help us to trust it with the same faith which we give to work. Strengthened by our participation in holy silence and rest, may we come to see in winter not a death that is a final ending, but rather an opening that leads to the next stage of life.



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