

7 January 2024 – Epiphany, or When the Penny Drops

The feast of the Epiphany is when Christians celebrate the visit of the Magi, Jesus' baptism, and the wedding at Cana. These were milestones in Christ's life. Jonathan Williamson reflects on epiphanies in our life's journeys.

Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6. Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon: Epiphany, or When the Penny Drops – Jonathan Williamson

A favourite (true) story of mine comes from the late Derek Nimmo, in one of his many compendiums of anecdotes. Three senior church figures, each representing a different denomination, were interviewed for a Christmas radio broadcast. They were interviewed separately, and at the end of the interview they were each asked what they would like for Christmas. The Methodist replied that his greatest Christmas present would be the end of poverty and world hunger. The Baptist replied that they would be delighted to have a long-lasting world peace. And the Anglican – not having heard the responses of the other two – replied, “well, how kind of you to ask: I would love a small box of crystallised fruit.”

This story came to mind as I examined today's readings – readings which invite us to examine the significance of a powerful light shining in the world, a guiding star, and gifts offered by people of high status from a non-Jewish community to a Jewish boy. The readings tell of a new season of light given to Israel by God, and of a recognition of the significance of the Christ child. In the little anecdote at the start, the Anglican priest – to use the modern parlance – didn't get the memo. However, we see so clearly that the Magi clearly *do* understand something important. The moment is a clear revelation that Jesus is here for Gentiles as well as Jews. It is an epiphany.

What I focused on as I studied all the texts for this morning, is the concept of epiphany. We understand it in the Christian year as the revelation of who Jesus is – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi. Within the nativity the concept of recognition, realisation, or revelation is a constant theme – from the annunciation to Mary, to the visit of the angels to the shepherds, to the Magi's realisation of the divinity of the infant, to the dreams that ensured that the infant Jesus remained alive and free from the wrath of Herod.

As I dwelt on the concept of epiphany I wondered if it would be useful for us to consider those moments – those epiphanies – that have helped us on our journeys. Those moments, situations, when we have been convinced of something – something bigger than us – of understanding our place in the universe, of being loved, of being aware of a love that holds us securely, of finding ourself in a thin place where the reality of God breaks through to us as an individual. Those moments may have been when we were feeling fully alive, or fully connected to God, or possibly when we have felt quite remote from church life or any deep relationship with God, and in a vulnerable state.

My late father was very helpful to me in working things out in my journey, purely by recalling his personal epiphanies. There was one particular moment in his life that stuck with him throughout his church ministry, and which he shared with me when I was discussing matters of faith with him on one of our walks in Lister Park in Bradford. As a child he had been sent to Sunday school at St Donard's church in East Belfast. He was later – to use his words – “converted” at a church mission at a separate venue unconnected to that church. Later in life he was ordained and found himself invited to preach at St Donard's church one Sunday evening. He was full of what might be described as evangelical zeal, and he wanted to warn the congregation that merely sitting in the pews was not enough. Effectively he intended to say

that *despite* his years at Sunday school he was not a proper Christian until his conversion. His Sunday schooling was of naught. He sat in the preacher's stall that evening and set up towards the pulpit – and as he was walking up the steps, he suddenly had an epiphany. He changed his theme. Instead of saying that *despite* of his Sunday schooling he became a Christian, he said that it was *because* of his Sunday schooling he became a Christian. He suddenly saw God's hand in the love his family had taken in sending or taking him to church and bringing him up in a Christian fellowship. He was shaken out of his arrogant approach to the faith, and he humbly came to understand how he had been found by God. It was an experience he never forgot, and he remained humble enough to accept that his faith needed to be continually worked out in the years to come as he faced many challenges.

You may have in mind one or more particular moments from your own journeys when something has clicked, a penny has dropped – be it a significant moment or a gentle small niggles. And as we recall the gifts given by the Magi we may be thankful for those gifts of insight or revelation as we have hopefully come to know God more deeply.

Some of us may be longing for an epiphany right now. There are aspects of the Christian faith that might prove unattainable or incomprehensible. There have been many times in my Christian life when I have longed for a penny to drop, and I have gradually learned to be patient in waiting, and I am prepared to accept that there are some things about the Christian life that I will never fully understand, or which will never mean as much to me as they do to others. That difference to others used to gnaw away at me – as though I didn't get the memo about what being a Christian meant. Now, I am quite content to return to church each week, and to receive what I can, and give what I can. I am grateful for the fact that I am on a continual journey and can keep on learning and having epiphanies. Even in researching for this sermon I realised for the first time from Matthew's gospel how the Magi's finding of Jesus was not by accident, but by purpose and guidance by a divine hand.

So in the next few days when there may be talk of resolutions for the new year, I wonder if we can take a moment to look back and be encouraged by the recollection of moments when light has been shone on our journeys, and to be reassured that offering ourselves to God - in whatever state we find ourselves in - is worth more than any gold or spice or perfume.

Amen

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