



Epiphanies and Faith

An address for the Agape on Epiphany ● 6th January 200 ● Rev Heather

Some words from Isaiah have become very familiar to us over the past weeks. They have been a scriptural focus in several services, including our Christmas Eve Mass, and for one of the meditations in our Advent book. They are words that have great life in them and they lift up our minds and our hearts. They come from the prophet Isaiah:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Light shining in darkness. A revelation of the nature of Jesus Christ – Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace - telling us that in Christ we encounter the divine, that the light of heaven has broken into the darkness of this world and of our souls.

This is what we celebrate at Epiphany, a word that can be translated as manifestation, appearance, showing forth, a bringing of light. It's not a word that we commonly use in conversation, yet we *could* use it of those important experiences in our lives when new understanding penetrates our minds, when a flash of insight transforms our perception of a situation, when the world lights up because we become aware of the working of spirit. We could say of such times, "I had an epiphany," but we would probably say something like, "The light dawned" or "I suddenly saw..." Whether we use the word or not, these experiences are epiphanies and they are what lift our lives out of the mundane. They are moments when we are in contact with our divine spirit.

Life without Epiphanies

What life is like without such experiences is perhaps described in the book of Acts, chapter 27. There we read that Paul was on board a ship bound for Rome, but the ship was caught in a storm and was in great danger. The writer of Acts says, "When neither sun or stars appeared for many a day, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned" (Acts 27:20)

They had no light. No sun or stars appeared (and the word "appeared" is the word epiphany). There was no epiphany, no light from the heavens, only the tossing of the wind and the waves of the sea. All hope of being saved was gone.

That is what life is like without epiphanies, without times when light shines in our darkness. A sense of lostness fills us. Before us is meaninglessness and emptiness – and darkness.

But what a difference when we see a great light, when the glory of the spiritual that interpenetrates our physical world becomes evident to us for a moment!

Epiphany

Epiphany is a celebration of the fact that light does shine in the darkness and light it up. It brings before us again the awareness that we are beings of both the heavens and the earth, that our human existence is shot through with the divine glory. That is what was manifested, shown forth, in Jesus Christ.

Epiphany comes at the end of the twelve days of Christmas; it is the culmination of the Christmas festival. It is associated with two events in the life of Jesus – the visit of the Magi and his baptism by John. Both of these events reveal the glory of God in our midst, as we see first of all the Magi worshipping the child in whom they perceived their master Zarathustra, and then see the spirit of Christ entering into Jesus at his baptism.

So this day is about perceiving - perceiving the ancient spirit that inspired the young child, perceiving the transformation in Jesus of Nazareth through the inflow of the spirit of Christ. And it is about our perceiving those moments in our lives where spirit is at work, where light is shining, where the glory of God is being revealed in us and around us.

Faith

The Magi's experience was very different from that of the sailors on the ship in the book of Acts. The sailors had no sun or stars to give any light or guidance. The Magi saw a star which they knew to be a sign that the promised one had been born. They knew from their studies the land in which he would appear and so they set out on their journey to find him.

I think we sometimes have a picture of the Magi journeying from their homes in Persia to Palestine with the star always before them, guiding them. Yet that is not the scenario that Matthew presents. Our first encounter with the Magi is when they arrive at Herod's palace in Jerusalem asking where the king of the Jews is, whose star they had seen in the skies of their homeland.

That star and its significance motivated them to undertake a great journey of faith. It seems that the star was not continually in front of them to guide them, for they went first of all to the place that logic suggested would be the birthplace of this king. But when they left Herod's palace, the star again appeared to them. Matthew says very dramatically:

When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, (or behold) the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.

There they experienced the climax of their journey of faith, the moment of epiphany when they saw the glory of God in the face of a child.

From the story of the Magi, we can discover something about faith and how this will lead us to the moment of epiphany.

Faith requires us to use our thinking

First of all, it says that faith is not blind. The journey was not a foolhardy one, although outwardly it may have seemed so to those who looked on.

The Magi had an experience – they saw the star. Then they directed their thought towards what they perceived. They studied their sacred lore, and in the light of this, decided to see for themselves the momentous event that was taking place.

They planned their journey – it was not an impulsive act. It was based on knowledge, perception and thinking. These were brought together in the decision to act - to make the journey.

Faith requires us to use our thinking - to be perceptive, to think about what we perceive and to act in the light of this. It does not mean that all our choices will be right. The Magi went to the palace instead of to Bethlehem. But the star set them on their road again and brought them to their destination. When we are on the journey of faith, our thinking becomes more directed and focused.

Faith keeps us going when the journey is difficult

In setting out on their journey, the Magi expressed their faith in action. In T S Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi", he strips away the sometimes romantic picture presented of this journey, putting these words into the mouths of the travellers:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.*

They journeyed from the known into the unknown, from their own land to a strange land, and it was faith that kept them going through the difficulties of the journey.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a great chapter on what has been accomplished through faith. It begins with these words: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Faith is not about wishful thinking. It is the assurance of the reality of what is not seen. It is a conviction that hope will be realised. It is what sustains us in our lives as we journey towards our goals.

Faith leads us to an epiphany

When they reached the end of their journey they experienced something wonderful. They knelt in awe and worship before the child and they saw the glory of God radiating from him. That was their epiphany. And they would not have experienced it unless they had acted with faith. If they had stayed in their own country, studying and debating and contemplating, they would have missed this most important moment of their lives.

I'm sure we all heard different things as we listened to the New Year message from Rev Antoinette. One thing that I particularly noted was what she said about living on the edge between the known and the unknown.

That was the Magi's journey. That is our journey when we choose to live our lives according to the light we have received, to the truth that we have come to understand, to the star that we have taken within us as both our hope and our guide.

In the birth of Jesus and, later, in the baptism when Christ entered into this human being, God shone forth into our world. Because of this, the world is no longer engulfed in darkness. The light is always shining, and when we hold this vision before us and in faith keep moving towards it, there are moments when we experience the glory of God in the circumstances of our lives and of our world, when epiphany becomes a reality for us.

So shall it be.

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