

Epiphany

Looking forward to the Feasts of the coming year reminds us that we come to worship with eyes fixed on a horizon: that's the light of the Epiphany.

There are many epiphanies, moments of enlightenment, of clear-sightedness, in the gospels, in scripture and in our lives. The story which we celebrate today as *the* Epiphany is an interplay between wonder and fear.

We are told that the wise men from the East are explorers: guided by a star they are overwhelmed with joy at finding the child in Bethlehem, they are warned in their dreams about Herod, and they go home 'by another way'. Herod, on the other hand, is *frightened*, fearful at the prospect of a pretender to his throne. He whips up similar anxiety all around him in Jerusalem, he uses the wise men to find the child, his deceit is uncovered, and he is left without knowledge, spiralling into more fear. He is a study in stay-at-home smallness.

In twelve verses, Matthew paints a picture of wisdom and fear as opposites: that's a Gospel in itself. The Epiphany is more than the travelogue of exotic Eastern gurus. It is a story of the choices that lie before all of us. Choices that, to be rightly made, depend on open eyes, open hearts and open minds.

Remember that Jesus' closest friends and followers consistently failed to see who he was throughout his ministry. As the gospels tell it, only in the light of the *resurrection*-epiphany, a larger window on glory, did the previous three years' experiences begin to make sense to them. Epiphanies are to be aged, digested, and truly grasped with hindsight. Equally, thank God, our lives are not understood or defined in split seconds by the best, *or the worst*, things we've ever done. Neither our greatest achievement nor our worst sin characterizes us with God. It is the entirety of our response to the gift of life which makes sense of who we are. As St Paul tells us, 'we know now only in part, but *then* we shall be fully known'. The '*then*' in that sentence is crucial. That is what the gospels call *καιρός*, 'the right time', God's moment, when glory will become overwhelming and the light will illumine all those other epiphanies and make them complete. The paradox of death for Christians is that it gives meaning to our lives.

We worship and engage with God in community with one another, even though it may be a virtual community this year; those who join us today come with particular gratitude that we will continue to be able to do so in lockdown. We all participate because we are somewhere on a spectrum of understanding, of

having glimpsed glory and wanting to see more. That is the key: what is the *more* we want? It is human to want more. Equally, it is human experience to find the acquisition of *more*, mere quantity, ultimately unsatisfying. The *Magi* had enough *stuff* – gold, frankincense and myrrh – but they glimpsed glory - the light of the star - and followed it until they found the unlikely king of the universe, and they left the *stuff* behind: that was their offering of worship.

And they did that in *hope*, the second of Paul's list of 'theological virtues': faith, hope and love. We need all three of these, but *hope* is the pivot that gets us there and the engine of the spiritual life. Human beings are constituted by hope; it is a supremely human quality, part of what Henry James called 'the pain of consciousness'. *Faith* sets us on the way; it is the point of contact, the conversion. *Love* is the destination, the fullness of life to which we tend on this path, *God* who calls us home. But *hope* leads us, day by day, from glimpse *to* glory, from inspiration to realisation, from the idea of a god to God.

The Epiphany gospel proclaims and enacts that hope, of the opening-out of the people of God to include, potentially, the whole of humankind. But it is also a sign, an icon, of the whole of our lives in Christ, lives which are founded on faith, fed by hope and aimed at our final destination, perfect love.