

John Docherty, 2014-01-05

Epiphany

Today is the final Sunday of the advent season. It's the Sunday closest to the date we know as "Epiphany", and more or less wraps up the celebration of Jesus' birth.

The name "Epiphany" is drawn from the Greek, and it could be translated as 'a manifestation', or 'a revelation'. The literal translation of 'epi' / 'phany' might be something like "on the surface", implying something that is now made clear, that previously wasn't.

In the context of the church calendar, "Epiphany" actually has 4 possible events in mind, depending on your tradition.

One possible event is the birth of Jesus itself – the Nativity. In some eastern traditions, this is the date that is celebrated as "Christmas". The 25th of December doesn't come into play at all. The 'epiphany' focus here is the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah to the Jews, as represented by the shepherds.

A second event celebrated as "Epiphany" is the baptism of Jesus, the dove hovering over him, and the voice from Heaven declaring that "... this is my son, in whom I am well pleased ...". In western traditions, though, this is usually celebrated on the Sunday *after* Epiphany.

Another possible event celebrated as "Epiphany" is the wedding at Cana, when Jesus first reveals himself as one capable of performing miracles, and, by implication, the son of God. In some traditions, the date of this event is understood to coincide with Jesus' birth date.

I've always associated it with the arrival of the Magi, and the "revealing" of this child as the son of God. And that *is* one of the 4 possible events celebrated as "Epiphany", and the one most commonly celebrated in western traditions : the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi.

Now, Matthew doesn't mention how many wise men came to worship Jesus, but since three gifts are mentioned – gold, frankincense and myrrh – we have since early times assumed three persons. Again, no names are given for these three men, but traditions develop and dominate, and in the west we've generally named them Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar : kings of Persia, Arabia and India.

But, that's just us. Syrian Christians have other names, different eastern traditions still other names.

On Christmas Eve I read from a book that is drawn from the Ethiopian church's traditions around the Christmas story. For some reason, Ethiopia has had a very long and close relationship with the Judeo-Christian world. There appear already to be Jews in Ethiopia at the time of Christ, as there are certainly already Jewish communities scattered throughout Europe, the middle east, and North Africa, well beyond the bounds of Israel.

We're told in the book of Acts that Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch who was in Israel to worship in Jerusalem. When Philip meets him, he is reading the prophet Isaiah, and, as Philip explains the prophecies to him, he asks to be baptised.

He then, presumably, returns to Ethiopia and spreads the word of this Jewish Messiah. And a Christian church grows, far from the burgeoning church in Europe, with its own customs, traditions and history.

The Ethiopian names for the wise men are Tanisuram, Maliko, and Zesesba. And, like other traditions, they are meant to represent the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God to the world beyond Judaism. But more than that, in the Ethiopian tradition, these men are reputed to be direct descendants of the three sons of Noah : Shem, Ham and Japheth.

So they are, in fact, by *this* telling, representatives of the entire human race. A vanguard delegation, if you will, of all nations, all peoples, all men and women who will ultimately recognize this child as the bringer of life.

They are direct participants in this recognition, this revelation, this 'epiphany', this 'bringing to the surface'. They see Jesus for who he is – not just as a poor, anonymous child of a poor, anonymous carpenter in a poor, backwoods corner of the mighty Roman Empire. They see him for who he *is*, not for what he appears to be.

Now, of course, this word 'epiphany' has made its way into common usage, quite separate from the religious celebration. We use the word more commonly to refer to some moment of illumination when, all of a sudden, something becomes clear to us.

These are our ‘eureka’ moments, to borrow another Greek image, this time from Archimedes. The moment when a light goes on in our head, and we are finally able to piece together the various parts of a puzzle that has, until now, eluded us.

Or when we wake up to a truth that has been hidden from us, or that we have been unwilling to acknowledge.

Within the context of our faith journey, Dorothy might refer to these as ‘Holy Spirit’ moments - moments when God interrupts our casual stroll and forces us to examine the path we’re on; forces us to open our eyes; shows us something we haven’t been able to see before.

And these moments, when, and if, they happen, can be life-changing moments. They are the moments that define our subsequent choices; that push us this way, or that.

But I’m using the word ‘moments’ in the broadest possible sense. They may be very specific, unique points in time when a light flashes and the world takes on a completely different hue; or they may be ‘periods’ of time when a growing sense of something finally takes shape in a clear and unmistakable fashion.

The Magi, for example, didn’t stumble upon this baby in a manger while they were out looking for something else. They weren’t, like the shepherds in the fields, taken by surprise and thrust into a story they weren’t prepared for. They were searching, following a particular guide, and were fully expecting to find a child who would be king of the Jews – they just didn’t know *which* child they’d find.

For me, the ‘epiphany’, ‘eureka’ moments, with regard to my faith, have been few and far between. Some of them have been singular events, others a more subtle, growing awareness of something central to how I understand God.

One of the earliest moments might be my discovery of evangelical Christianity. Here was a community of people who took Jesus seriously, and were consciously trying to live faithful lives. I was impressed by the fact that they knew their Bibles inside and out, and that they could actually quote and find specific passages. I was inspired by them to get to know this book, and to seek to better know the God it presents.

I remember very clearly the day I decided, as an adult, to commit myself to trying to follow Jesus. It wasn’t a decision to embrace a particular theology. It was rather a decision to better understand who Jesus was and what he taught, and to reclaim

and re-embrace a set of values I had learned as a child in the catholic church, though I hadn't really learned much of the biblical underpinnings of those values.

For those of you who weren't here on the Sunday before Christmas, I said in my message that, and I quote : "... Christmas, for me, is a time to embrace anew the promise inherent in this infant in the manger. The promise that peace on earth is possible. The promise that it really is within our capacity to have good will towards all. The promise that if we are able to recognize, and value, and aspire to the innocence of a child, with all of the risks and vulnerability that that implies, that we really do have some hope of finding our way to heaven."

I don't think that aspiring to have the innocence of a child is a Pollyanna-ish approach to life – a bubbly, optimistic outlook that is blind to reality and that always finds a silver lining in every situation. I doubt that many people would accuse me of being bubbly anything, much less bubbly optimistic. I'm temperamentally more inclined to recognize obstacles than opportunities.

But recognizing obstacles doesn't equate to a dour pessimism or a passive fatalism. I'm quite capable, I think, of trying to find my way over, around, or through obstacles. Even obstacles to living with the innocence of a child.

That decision to follow Jesus was one step in my aspiring to the innocence of a child. It was my way of re-entering a world where ideals were within reach; where mystery was still alive; where life had a purpose and a guide.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I had another 'epiphany' moment some years later when I was caught up in a church crisis (not here at MFM), where these biblically well-read followers of Jesus used their familiarity with scripture to attack one another and to push hard for particular actions that were, in my mind, inconsistent with my understanding of Jesus' teachings.

I was devastated. All of my child-like 'illusions' of what the church was, or could be, were shattered, and I came very close to losing my faith and walking away from what now appeared to be a failed experiment. My eyes were opened to an ugliness that I couldn't, or wouldn't, see before.

I think part of the problem in that particular situation was that the people involved were from very different backgrounds, and had come to faith in very different ways, acquiring very different understandings of what it meant to be faithful. There was also a rigidity that didn't allow the conflict to play out in a healthy way.

It took me a long time to come to terms with the ‘failure’ of Christianity that I saw in that conflict. My eventual ‘epiphany’ in this regard was a realization that what I had witnessed wasn’t a failure of Christianity. It wasn’t even, *per se*, a failure of evangelical Christianity. It was the failure of a group of followers of Christ to choose to act in love, and with some compassion, *precisely* when they were convinced that they were right and that the others were wrong.

And that realisation that the problem wasn’t with Jesus’ message, but rather with our occasional inability to live up to the challenge of that message, has meant that I have been able to remain a Christian, such as I am, in the face of any number of failures on my part, and on the part of people around me.

Because I *do* believe that we are capable of living up to that message, even if it means that every choice, every decision, every act is fraught with the danger of failing.

Because, alongside the occasional failures that I’ve been witness to, or that I’ve been responsible for, there have also been the occasional inspiring examples of love and compassion in action.

We *do* sometimes live up to our calling.

And with this celebration of Epiphany, I’m reminded that we are called to be attentive to the signs that God is near.

We don’t have a star to follow, or an oracle to listen to.

But we do have this Book.

And we do have a diverse group of people here at MFM who are all trying, in their way, to lead faithful lives.

Yes, we are a supremely imperfect group.

Yes, our personalities can sometimes get in the way.

Yes, we have our share of obstacles to living in harmony.

But alongside the difficult personal issues, there is, I think, a desire to find our way through.

Alongside the occasional stiffness of our structures, and our committees, and our processes, there is a willingness to make something good of all this effort and energy.

Alongside the struggles and the disappointments, there is Faspa, and our arts nights, and our Easter brunch, and our Sunday School picnic, and our corn roast, and our retreat. All times when we simply enjoy being together.

Alongside the manure and smells of a stable, there is also the warmth and comfort of a place of security.

Alongside the rough, unsophisticated shepherds from the local hills, there are the exotic wise men from distant lands, and there is somehow a shared sense of connectedness.

Alongside a paranoid old man in the person of Herod the Great, who will shortly order the slaughter of every male child under the age of two, there is a child in a manger who will turn an empire upside down.

So, tell me, what are some of your ‘epiphany’ moments as you have sought to understand God?

When, and how, have your eyes been opened?

What insights do you have to share with the rest of us?

What keeps you hopeful?