

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

26th January 2020

Isaiah 53:1-12

Acts 8:26-40

Last week when we thought about the idea of Epiphany, we asked the question about our own glimpses of God. When have you had moment of epiphany? When have you glimpsed the face of God in Jesus? What has it meant to you? How had it changed your life, in focus or purpose? In this season of epiphany, it is good for us to think not only about how God has been revealed and perceived in Jesus in the past, but also about our own present lives. Without vision the people perish, said the King Solomon. And that is still true. We all need a bit of vision.

But this week we are thinking more of “the people” of King Solomon’s saying, than of ourselves. If without vision the people perish, how can we help our community get a glimpse of God? After all, that is in fact our calling: to bring God to people and people to God. That is what it means to be a Royal Priesthood, which is one of the ways that Peter describes the church. A priesthood is a body of people working together to help bridge the gap between God and his creation, especially his human creation.

And so we should be asking ourselves: How will Christ be revealed today and tomorrow? How will we be part of it? Where is it already happening?

As we have said before, revelations of God, epiphanies, are a work of the Holy Spirit, of course. We can’t force an epiphany on anyone else any more than we can manufacture one for ourselves. But God the Holy Spirit needs us, chooses to need us. God has determined to work through his children, which is why instances of people becoming Christian without interaction with another Christian are vanishingly rare. There are always the one or two which prove that God can work without us, but looking at the general pattern of things, God has chosen to work with his children.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was interested enough in finding God that he was poring over the portion of Scripture which he had. Remember that in those days Scripture wasn’t bound together into one volume but was written on separate scrolls. This man had the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and was reading from what we know as chapter 53. He was reading aloud, because everyone did that in these days, and so

Philip heard him and knew what was going through his mind. It would have been harder if he had had a book and was reading silently – even harder if he had an electronic book with no title visible – Philip wouldn't have known what he was reading then. Philip heard him because he not only went close but stayed near. If he had just watched from a distance, he would have lost an chance to interact. But he went and stayed close, so he could follow where the man was at.

And when Philip asked him how he was getting on with his reading, the man was honest enough to say, that he didn't know how he could understand it unless someone gave him some help. In other words Philip had to do his bit by opening the conversation - if the Holy Spirit had hoicked him off to the Gaza road and he had kept his mouth shut we would never have heard of this Ethiopian, because there simply would be no story. But equally the man who was in the chariot had to be prepared to admit he needed and wanted help with his understanding.

The man was seeking for epiphany. He was seeking for someone to help him pull back the veil of misunderstanding so that he could glimpse the face of God. And because Philip asked the question he was able to say so and to find the revelation he sought.

So, how can we be part of Gods epiphany, of Christ's epiphany today? Does such a thing even exist? Do people want it?

Well, yes it exists. People are still being gripped by the fact of Christ, and by the vision of Jesus that we might live in tune with God. People are still filled with guilt and need forgiveness and hope and purpose. God is still at work. We see it ourselves if we know how and where to look.

Look, for instance, at recent examples of this in the Christmas services. Christmas is often a time when we get to share our vision of God with people who are not often in worship. Look at the joy of sharing carols in the street with neighbours of other churches. Look at the good response.

Look at the golf club carol service. Look at who came, so many who are rarely if ever in church. Think of the joy and the relaxed atmosphere.

Look at the watch night service. Think of who was there. Or on Christmas morning. There is something about the Christmas services which draws out those who otherwise can't quite find their way to the church's usual way of doing things. Maybe it is sentiment; there is something vaguely romantic somehow about coming to a church at midnight and singing about a baby born long ago. Our faith is not built on sentiment, but on the work of Jesus, from birth to resurrection and beyond. But still sentiment is not wrong. Sentiment means feeling, and feelings are one of the things God has given us by which he can come to us, get under our guard and take root in our hearts. In fact very few of us come to an epiphany of

God through intellect alone. God is love and that is not an intellectual idea but a vibrant reality. Maybe if we are to be part of epiphany, we need to learn to show our feelings more, in worship and in life. That is far from traditional for the Church of Scotland, of course, but the society we live in is changing. The phlegmatic Scot was never really more than a caricature or aspiration anyway and is less true now than it has been previously.

So sentiment is one way of helping people see the face of God.

Familiarity is another thing, for some of the Christmas comers. At the same time, these Christmas comers are those who generally reject the weekly worship, which is still pretty familiar to any who have once been part of it. For those who have not, they are familiar with Christmas carols because they hear them elsewhere. Nothing we do on a Sunday from week to week is familiar to most people. This has long been the case. This is why since at least the days of William Booth people have been writing hymns and worship songs to tunes from secular life.

But using accessible music is at best a very partial answer, and so we need to be aware of and remember how very unfamiliar Church has become to most of our neighbours. And that is any church: traditional church like ours or the more avant-garde forms of worship which emphasise loud music, maybe even loud lighting, and emotion – which may look a bit more like a rock concert, compared to the classical concert-look which you find here – if that's a valid comparison to make. It doesn't matter, worship is an alien concept. And what we do in worship (however we do it) like singing songs about or to God, like talking about God at all and certainly like praying, it's all quite different to what most people are used to in life. We can't change that – worship should be different, after all. Coming into God's presence should not be the same as going to the shops (although of course you can go to the shops in God's presence any time you want.) And so when we have invited someone to come to church, we should stay with them, we should let them know what is going on, we should do our best to remove, not the mystery, because God is mystery, but the feeling of alienation that can come when you dare to enter a place where the others are at home and you are a stranger.

When people come to the church, what they expect to find is a different atmosphere from normal life. Christmas services are popular because there is an atmosphere created by dark and the music, by the familiarity and by the expectation of the season. I wonder if as far as helping people towards epiphany within the context of church is concerned, one of the places we fall down is to do with atmosphere? We don't tend to do atmosphere very well, because it goes together with sentiment. How might we help create an atmosphere of the holy? Lighting can help. Music is important. Silence counts for at least as much as speech. Such worship makes demands. It asks that you engage with the holy. It asks that you be real and leaves the holy faces at the door. Maybe over the next months we might change things around in our services a little to see if we cannot

find ways that will help our worship to be times of holy expectation for all who come through the door.

But of course, so many of those who seek God, even if they can't or don't or won't name their seeking in those terms, don't come through the doors of our buildings at all. They live beside us and seek answers in their music or in philosophies and ways of thinking, new or old, or in fitness and activity or in service to others. Our society has come so far from God that in the search for meaning and direction which we all have, the idea that God is our end or could be the beginning of our search, the idea that God is there or relevant at all simply does not cross most minds. People do the things which we associate with faith and following Jesus without reference to God: they meditate, which is a kind of prayer, they make rituals in their lives, they seek to make a positive contribution to the world. But there is still that curtain which needs drawn back which prevents them seeing that what holds all their aspirations together is found in Jesus.

We cannot force an epiphany. But we can be like Philip, prepared to ask the question when it presents itself, prepared to put ourselves out and take a little personal risk so that the veils may be more often drawn back and people catch a glimpse of God.

Epiphany. Glimpsing the face of God. In Jesus.