

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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EPIPHANY

3rd January 2016

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

We are approaching the feast of the Epiphany, which will be on the Wednesday of this week. When I was a child, all epiphany meant to me was the end of Christmas. It was when you had to get your decorations down and put away. Not to have them down by January 6th was somehow "unlucky" according to my grandmother. Later I learned that the feast of the Epiphany was the time to remember the wise men coming to see Jesus, and indeed in parts of the world January 6th is as important as Christmas day and is when you get your presents!

But what is an epiphany really? What does it mean? It means a revealing, a showing of something to someone. Something which was hidden has been revealed.

We had a day of epiphanies on Wednesday of this past week, when documents which had been held secret under the thirty year (soon to be twenty year) rule were disclosed. It may not matter very much to you to discover where the moon dust given by Richard Nixon to the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson is now somewhere, unspecified, in Downing street – although it is interesting to reflect that what was once incredible, wonderful material is now not wanted by the Science museum. Apparently they have better examples of the substance, and they rate these tiny fragments as on the same level of a toothbrush once used by Napoleon – make of that what you will.

To have revealed that Mrs Thatcher did not want the advertisements warning about AIDS to be so explicit as the health service knew that they needed to be thirty years ago, is interesting but nothing more: she did not get her way on this one, and so it is simply a footnote to history. However, Oliver Letwin was less than happy about what the thirty years' revelations showed of his more youthful ideas. And which of us would hold to every opinion that we thought or voiced thirty years ago? Thirty years ago I still thought that God could never ask me to be a minister, because he didn't approve of women in that role.

Epiphanies, revelations.

Matthew tells us the story of the wise men, the magi, who came from the East, which could be almost anywhere in the world when you think of it, to see the baby king. Luke also has an epiphany story, which is the story of the baby Jesus being taken to the temple for Mary and Joseph to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice for him, and Simeon and Anna recognising him and prophesying about him. They are very different stories, though both are dramatic, but the gospel writers include them for the same reason: they want to show that Jesus, who came in fulfilment of Jewish prophecy, was greater than one race or faith could make him. They wanted to tell everyone that Jesus who never,

as far as we know, travelled outside of his own land, came for all the world. They are stories of this revelation, this epiphany.

And let us be clear. To the gospel readers, and hearers back when these things were being told orally and when they were first written, this was a great epiphany. The early Christians were pretty much all Jews, and the book of Acts recounts the struggles which they had to accept that non-Jews could become Christians like them without first becoming Jews like them. Could that be true? This was something that would radically change their thinking, and none of us likes to have our thinking radically changed. It takes effort, it means opening our minds. It is easier to cling to what we think we know, what we are used to. So on one level the story of the wise men, who sadly are never referred to as Kings in the Bible, is about revealing to the Jewish Christians that from the very beginning, Jesus came for the whole world and that the wise people of the world would recognise that. Epiphany.

We can be very, very glad that the early Christians took that epiphany, that revelation on board. Otherwise the church and our faith would look very different, if indeed it had ever reached us. It is certainly worth our remembering and celebrating that Jesus came to reveal that God's love was for the whole world, not just for the Jews.

But of course there is more to epiphany than that. Epiphany is not just a commemoration of a revelation which happened at the foundation of our faith. Epiphany still happens today. Epiphany is that "Aha" moment that comes to all of us as we think about the things of God. It is now, as it was then, God revealing himself in Jesus.

It is easy, or fairly easy for us to think about Jesus. After all he was born like us, grew up like us and lived like us, even if it was in a far away long ago culture. We can identify with Jesus, with his travelling, his frustrations with those who listened and those who followed, with his suffering and death. It is a lot harder for us to think about God.

Thinking about God is likely to leave your mind feeling as though it is going to explode. He has always been. There is no answer to the child's question "Who made God?" because it is a non-question. He has always been. Always. And he always will be. Always. He can do anything, and the reason he so often doesn't do the things that we think would be a good idea is because he doesn't think like us. God is holy, pure, but alien. God is all that really matters in the world or out of it. But he is so vast, so hard to get a hold of.

And this is why Jesus came. Jesus came to bring God into our frame of reference, not for God's sake, but for ours. He came to show us what God looks like when he has all the limits of thought and action that we have. He came to show us that God loves us immensely, so much so that he would take on all the limits which his creative powers endowed us with, so much that the creator would come to be a part of his creation. Jesus came to be an epiphany, to be with us so that we could look at him and say "Aha! So that is what God is like. That is what his love looks like, that is what he wants of us, and how he made us to be." Jesus came to bring us epiphany after epiphany.

Think of your own epiphanies. When something finally dropped into place in your thinking and the world not only made more sense but was a more wonderful place. Think of the time you first realised that God really loves you – not just everyone, and not

just theoretically, but when you realised he loves you with all his immense and incomprehensible heart. And if you have never realised it, try to do so now: God. Loves. You. I remember that – the realisation made me want to turn cartwheels – which I have never been able to do.

Or think of the time when you realised that you did believe, that you wanted to have faith in God and trust him for all that Jesus came to bring in terms of salvation and renewal, for the world but also for you. Some people make a definite decision about that and can remember the day and the hour and the place. Others come to a gradual realisation, but each way is just as valid and the day when you realise it is true for you and has changed things, that is a day of epiphany.

Jesus came to reveal God to us, not just once, but over and over again. The people who spend most time in reading his words and thinking about his works, and in prayer with him are those who are most likely to experience the joy of epiphany most often. Because epiphany is a joy. Simeon and Anna in the temple were overjoyed to recognise in Jesus God's Messiah. When the wise men left their detour to Herod they were overjoyed to see the star which led them to their destination. There is always joy. Of course those who know this joy will also be those who have a responsibility to change, to act on what they learn and to allow themselves and the way that they live to be changed.

Today we are worshipping God at the beginning of a new year. The pages on your 2016 diaries may not all be blank – such is life – but even with appointments that you have written in, you really do not know what each day of the year will bring forth, or what the cumulative effect of this year will be for you or for the world.

28 years ago I had an epiphany, the culmination of a process of prompts, which led me to realise that not only might God call women to be ministers in his service, but that he might even call me to do that very thing. That affected the rest of my life – but, if you think about it, it also has affected you, for better or for worse, or most likely for a mix of the two. I do not hold the same opinions that I did thirty years ago, and I expect that in many ways you do not either. (If you were born then!) Epiphany reminds us that our understanding of God and of ourselves and of the world and of how they all come together in Jesus is not a static thing, nor should it be. Epiphany is about us learning and growing and delightedly changing as we get another and then another glimpse of God and his presence and the extent of his love.

Whatever else may be written in your 2016 diaries, my prayer is that there will be revelations recorded there, revelations which will delight you and lead you deeper into God's love. Amen.

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