

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Epiphany

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Matthew 2:1-12

Ephesians 3:1-6

As we enter a new year, 2011, it lies before us like a blank page, waiting for the story and pictures of our lives to give it colour and shape, waiting for us to discover what lies ahead. That is why some of us love the idea of a new year, of course, and why others find it distressing. Perhaps it depends upon whether you are an optimist or a pessimist. Or maybe it has more to do with what life had already dealt to you and taught you: do you anticipate the future with delight or with fear? The future is always a mystery. Even when we get out of bed thinking we know the broad outlines of the day ahead, we can be mistaken.

On Thursday of this week, for instance, I got up thinking that the family was going to be out for most of the day, and I was going to have peace and quiet to sit down and write a sermon. But by 8.15 I was in the car with the children, and most of the day was spent on the slopes of the Cairngorms, helping them ski. No sermon was written that day, but I did do quite a lot of reflection on the theme of epiphany.

Epiphany, which is a mystery revealed. Epiphany which is light breaking into what has been darkness. Epiphany, which comes when we don't expect it and changes our assumptions for ever.

Andrew thought that if he had skis and went to the Cairngorms he could just sit on a tow and skim up the hill and down the piste. But when he went, with skis, he found that he fell off the tow as soon as he was on it, and skimming down the hillside wasn't as easy as he had thought. An epiphany: you do need lessons!!

Often epiphany is equated with the story we read today of the coming of the three wise men, to whom was revealed that the child of Mary was the King of the Jews. But whose coming also reveals to us that he is more than the King of the Jews, but King for all the world. Epiphany, in biblical terms is also associated with the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple and Simeon's song of prophecy and praise, naming the child a light for all nations. Both incidents show that Christ came for everyone, not just the Jews.

Paul talks about epiphany too, in the letter to the Ephesians. He doesn't use the word, but he shows that the mystery of God's plan for the world is being made clear in Jesus. He shows how what had been thought to be the case: that the Messiah would come to free the Jews, was actually only a small part of what was intended. The Messiah came to free all people in all times and places. What was expected was a candle, what they got was the sun. That is the epiphany which changed Paul's life. Realising it meant that he could no longer just tell the good news to the Jews, but appointed himself the apostle to the Gentiles. It's an epiphany which has changed our lives too. If no one had first seen that truth shining out from Jesus' life and death, then we would still be living alone and in darkness with no knowledge of God.

Our readings today are full of epiphanies. For Herod the epiphany was that the long-dreaded Messiah, the true king of the Jews was come. And this filled him with unholy terror, because it was what he most feared. In that epiphany he saw the downfall of his house, and another dynasty being established to rule Israel instead of him and his sons. His terror at the news was shared by Jerusalem, who were used to things the way they were, and didn't want any new King coming up and upsetting things, or upsetting their current King, who might take out his wrath on them.. The words of the old prophets were coming true, and a new era was opening in history, and Herod was more than perturbed. God's revelation brings threat. The threat of the old and threat of the new.

Epiphany is a revelation, and, by definition, a revelation can never be what you expect. An epiphany is not just making a bit clearer something that you had already begun to understand. It is a shining of light into a dark place. If you already think you know something, then *that* is not what can be made clear, illuminated for you. There is always an element of the unexpected, the surprise involved. Epiphany only comes when we let go of our assumptions and trust God.

The wise men had followed the star, or followed what they thought that the stars were saying. They understood that what they witnessed was to do with there being a new King of the Jews. So they expected to find him in Jerusalem. Kings are usually found in capital cities and in palaces. But when they followed their own expectations instead of their celestial revelation they found an old king of the Jews, made king by order of the Roman Senate after his nephew had tried to usurp him. They found an old man, near the end of his life, who was a practising Jew in name, though the extravagance of his life-style alienated him from many of his subjects. They found a man who was an Arab by birth, and who knew that he could never really belong to and be one of the people he lorded over. They found a man, whether they knew it or not, who was deeply suspicious of their news. To say, as Matthew does, that the news disturbed or frightened Herod is to put things mildly. Herod was a man with acute paranoia, paranoia deep-rooted and virulent enough to lead to him killing his own family lest they turn against him, paranoia so great that he instructed a large group of distinguished men should come to Jericho and left instructions that when he died they too should be killed. He was afraid there would be no general mourning for him and thought this might cause the appearance of grief for him. Fortunately for the men, his family did not carry out his orders. But certainly Herod was no new thing in the ancient world. He was a ruler, striving to better himself under his Roman overlords, like so many other tin-pot rulers within the Roman empire. That was what the wise men found when they depended on their own wisdom and expectations.

It was only when they depended on God and turned again to his guidance that they had a true epiphany, and the child they saw was revealed to them as the one worthy of their homage. When they saw the star they were filled with joy. God's revelations to us may take us by surprise, but if we are seeking God's way, then they will fill us with joy.

Following that star, leaving received wisdom behind, changed the lives of the wise men. Now God was able to speak with them more directly, rather than just by their accustomed method of consulting the heavens. Now in a dream he comes and tells them not to return to Herod: in the light of what they have discovered they know that this would not be safe. The way that they have been changed by their experience is surely shown by the fact that they did not retrace their steps, going over old ground, but returned home by another route.

We stand on the threshold of a year, and we wonder what it will hold for us. If we are people of faith, it may be that we hope that it will hold times of revelation, when God will speak to us, to teach and guide us. But as we are human, we probably already think we know what such times should be like. We may even have a good idea of what we hope God is going to say (and that it will be something to affirm us and tell us that we are right)! As we make our resolutions it may be that one of them has been to spend more time in prayer and Bible reading – which is an excellent resolution to make. But if we think that by doing this we will re-capture any experience of God which we have had previously, then we are plain wrong.

There was once a traveller who, happening to visit York Minster stepped into a side-chapel to pray. It was simply a habit. Nothing was expected. But God shoes that time of prayer to give an epiphany which caused a seismic change of mind. From then on, whenever this traveller had occasion to be in York that side chapel became a place of pilgrimage, a place where God's presence was expected. But the epiphany did not come again. Over time the expectation of the place died. In the end the traveller stopped going into the chapel, stopped focussing spiritual expectations on that one place, that one experience. For a while he wondered if he had lost his faith. But then, this time while driving on a busy motorway, talking over his projected day with his maker, God came to him again, with a revelation that was again to change his understanding of himself, of his God, and of the world.

That is epiphany. You can't force it, you can't experience it vicariously and you can't repeat it. But when we stay in touch with God, then we are most likely to lay ourselves open to letting God give it to us; when and as we need it.

Without moments of epiphany our faith becomes no more than a philosophy. Without moments of epiphany our faith becomes duty, rather than delight. Without putting ourselves as best we can in the place of God's leading, God's accompaniment, we will discover only what we always do: the old king and the old ways, the fear and the distrust of the world. But this year, 2011, let us look to God to do the leading, to give us the guidance, to reveal himself and his ways to us. And then when in twelve short months we look back at the year, whatever is written on the pages of our lives, whatever pictures are drawn there, we will know that this has been a good year, for it will have been a year spent in God's company, learning from him, loving and being loved by him. And what more could you ask for, ever?

Amen.