Revelation is a big word. It’s been somewhat commandeered by newspaper editors, always eager to discover that a politician or public figure has a salacious and hitherto-secret strand to their life. But it’s a crucial word for people of faith, because it makes a distinction between those events that we regard as part of the everyday order of things and those that we highlight as being of particular significance because they disclose the nature of God. Epiphany means revelation, so this is the Sunday in the church’s year when we reflect on this particular gift. Let me first explain how revelation works.

Twenty-five years ago a friend and I found ourselves recently arrived in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, on the west coast of Africa. Finding the central area of the city quite small, we started to divert from the main square and snoop around. After half an hour I turned down a side street and saw something that made my jaw drop. There was a monkey in a tree. After surprise, my first reaction was fear, because it was quite a big monkey. But then I saw a bunch of people close by having a party. It was some kind of Muslim naming ceremony, and there were dozens of people eating and having fun, and I gathered the monkey somehow belonged to them or was at least their responsibility. Still regaining my composure I turned round and saw, just as much to my amazement, a caricature colonial Englishman, wearing a pith helmet, walking down the street I’d just left. In a faltering voice, I said to him, ‘There’s a monkey, there, in the tree.’ Without looking up, he uttered the unforgettable words, ‘One becomes blasé when one’s been in the interior.’

A week later I had one of the scariest yet most exhilarating experiences of my life. My friend and I had made our way inland to the city of Mopti, on the Niger River in central Mali. We were staying about ten miles outside the town, and, late at night, the only way to get there was to travel on the roofrack of a shared taxi, clinging on to metal railing. The taxi drove much too fast and swayed off the single-track road each time it met oncoming traffic. But eventually my friend and I got the hang of how to sway with the camber of the road and keep stable. At this point he said, in a dead-pan voice but with a smile of irony, ‘One becomes blasé when one’s been on the exterior.’

What I saw when I wandered cluelessly into that Muslim naming ceremony was a beautiful scene of happy, generous people, at peace with themselves, at peace with their faith and traditions, in a lovely climate and a harmonious city, and, by the evidence of the monkey, at peace with creation too. It was my first visit to Africa, and it has shaped all my perspectives since. For all the caricatures of the continent as drenched in calamity – in corruption, famine, or civil war – I’ve held on to this peaceful picture as my default image of Africa. I’ve no idea about the convictions or adventures of the colonial man in the pith helmet, but whatever his perception of Africa, he’d without doubt lost the sense of wonder and admiration that overcame me on my first encounter. And my friend was so struck by this picture and the contrast with the colonial man’s reaction that in the midst of our wild adventure a week later it was the first thing that came to his mind.

That’s how revelation works. Revelation is something like the exuberant naming ceremony. It comes from outside you, it’s something you don’t seek, but it becomes the template for all future experience. It can become dulled and weary in the imaginations of those tired of life, like the pith-
helmet man. But at the moment of truth, as with that experience on the roof-rack of a speeding taxi, it becomes the touchstone for all understanding of the world.

That’s the human side of revelation. But what about the divine side? The process I’ve described could apply to any formative experience, like seeing the Grand Canyon or falling in love at first sight. It could even apply to growing up in a household and ever afterward regarding that household’s way of eating dinner or washing clothes as normal. To call something revelation it’s not enough for it to become a template for evaluating all future experience: it has to be some kind of encounter with God.

There’s more or less four kinds of divine revelation. The first is so common we tend almost to discount it. It’s what you might call the sunset version. I remember looking out at a streaky blood-red sky over Lake Huron in Canada at eventide and being told, ‘They say that’s the third-best sunset in the world.’ You couldn’t get a more Canadian sentence than that. Americans would settle for nothing less than the best and no one outside North America is counting. But the sunset was certainly beautiful, and the technical name for experiencing the glory of creation such that it feels like an insight into the ways of God is general revelation. It’s hard to believe there’s anyone on earth who wouldn’t look out on a sunset like that and think, ‘There must be a God somewhere.’

The second kind of divine revelation is the opposite. It’s intense and personal and unforgettable. You hear a voice, have a dream, or feel your heart strangely warmed. God is with you, and you should be overwhelmed, but mysteriously you don’t feel afraid. As a pastor I’ve found many people have told me about an experience like that. It takes your life to another level, gives you a benchmark that feels as true as anything you’ve known, and takes religion from someone else’s hand-me-down to the centre of your soul.

Even if there were no church, these two kinds of experiences, the general and the personal, would still be alive and well. People angst about the decline in churchgoing, but there’s no evidence that these kinds of encounters are any fewer than they ever were. The problem with the sunset kind is that it tends to have little or no crossover into the way people live. It has no obvious connection to how we relate more justly to other people or more sustainably to the planet. It’s a vague connection to a creator but it has no especial tie to the God of Jesus Christ. The problem with the heart-strangely-warmed kind is how it becomes more than the celebration of the self. Our culture so prizes amazing experiences, from bungee jumping to massage to narcotics to exotic holidays, that it’s hard to explain how a moment of revelation is different in kind. We’re so used to the figure of the half-crazed and dangerous religious fanatic that we have strong resistances to believing anyone that says ‘God is speaking to me.’

Which is why the other two forms of divine revelation are so important. The first is the most obvious: it’s the words carefully recorded and reverently rehearsed, gathered together across many centuries and telling the story of a people and the ways of God, a collection we call the Bible. Most of what’s in the Bible is a mixture of the first two kinds of revelation. The difference is that it’s been distilled over generations, and the parts that remain are largely the encounters and discoveries and reflections that are true to the God made known to people through the ages. The reason Jesus became recognised as the Christ is not just that he did extraordinary things but that he so clearly embodied the character of the God already made known to Israel. Scriptural revelation is a cumulative process by which each new book builds on and reinterprets those that precede it. The canon closed at 66 books not because that’s everything there is to say about God but because anything new to say about God is going to coincide with the character of the God revealed in those 66 books. God continues to surprise us; but God doesn’t shock us.

And the fourth kind of divine revelation develops out of the third. It’s about what happens when that scripture is turned into live conversation and action – or word and sacrament, as the church
calls it. We come to worship expecting to receive revelation. Baptism, eucharist, preaching, prayer, and the face of the poor – these are tried and trusted places and ways in which God has spoken to people over centuries. Not the only ways (I’ve mentioned three others) but the skeleton around which the rest of the body of revelation is structured. If we want to meet God, it’s best to hang around where God most frequently shows up. Scripture, sacrament, and service are those places. They’re not the only places we can feel a sense of peace or wonder or share a sense of solidarity or truth – but they are the places where we can reliably encounter the God of Jesus Christ.

My experience in West Africa was a kind of revelation. It had elements of the first two dimensions, the general sense of wonder and the personal encounter. And it certainly left a template for future understanding. But it wasn’t in any significant way connected to scripture or the church, and so I’ve never known what to make of it, except as a funny story. I wonder if you’ve had a profound experience like that but never known what to make of it. Maybe these four understandings of revelation can help you understand what part of the story was of God and what was just a funny story.

See how these four dimensions affect the way we think about other faiths. Other faiths can offer the first two kinds of revelation – the general wonder and the personal encounter. But they can’t offer the last two – the holy story and the encounter with Jesus in sacrament and service. See how this also shapes the way Christians respond to scientific scrutiny and quantitative research. Natural science can assess the wonders of creation and social science can measure the breadth and depth of personal experience. But neither can describe the community formed by the story and the encounter discovered in sacrament and service. There’s no reason whatever to belittle general revelation or personal experience. In fact without them it’s hard to say Christianity is joyful and outward-looking. But they’re not substitutes for the faith of the church.

And that brings us finally to the wise men. The story of the wise men is the definitive revelation story because it brings together all four kinds I’ve just described. It starts in the East, with the first kind, the general revelation of the stars. In Jerusalem the wise men experience the third kind – they hear, from the chief priests and scribes of the people, the story, about the babe being born in Bethlehem. In Bethlehem the wise men find the fourth kind of revelation – they encounter Jesus through service – the giving of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And before returning they have the second kind, the personal discovery – the dream that tells them to go home another way.

To receive any one of these kinds of revelation is a wonderful thing. To receive all four is very special. So special, we have a word for it. We call it Epiphany.