

## **Epiphany 2021**

**Fr Peter Groves**

Among my stranger experiences in this strangest of Christmas seasons was a televisual one. Like many people without much better to do, my wife and I spent three consecutive evenings this past week watching the BBC's flagship drama offering for the festive period, a new adaptation of Rumer Godden's novel "Black Narcissus". It's an odd story about a group of Anglican nuns in colonial India and Nepal, and that favourite dramatic mix of mystery, religion and sexual repression and release made it ideal for the great cinematic partnership of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, whose movie adaptation made in 1947 is one of the masterpieces of British film.

This new version owed as much to the film as to the novel, in many ways, but it was of particular interest to me, because I was employed as the religious advisor

to the project. This meant answering all sorts of questions from script editors and set designers, examining the screenplay for Anglo-Catholic plausibility – which I suspect is an oxymoron – and entertaining some famous actors to tea in the vicarage, before taking them to meet some real live nuns. I also spent three days before Christmas last year on the set at Pinewood, offering suggestions as to the appearance of the chapel, correcting mispronunciations of liturgical terms, teaching Jim Broadbent to make the sign of the cross, and so on. It was rather a fun experience, not least the part which involved being driven to and from the studio in a Jaguar limousine by a chauffeur who was more used to driving movie stars.

If you have ever been present while a scene is being filmed, and then watched the film itself later on, you will know how odd is that experience. What you see on your screen looks so very different from what you saw in person when the cameras were rolling. Our obsession with the visual leads us to think that the

eyewitness is always the most reliable of narrators, but of course where film is concerned, the real eyewitness is not the person standing on set during filming, the real eyewitness is the audience which watches the final version. The film, as a work of art, is far from complete when it is being acted. The end product is what really matters.

In that respect, the end product has a far stronger claim to being “the real thing” than do the particular events of the production. What I saw on set was partial, but what I saw on screen was final. The various prisms of interpretation and representation had turned the acting and speaking into something much more than I could comprehend when loitering just behind the cameras.

You can probably tell where I am going with this. The Feast of the Epiphany is a celebration of manifestation, of showing. We give thanks for God’s revelation of himself to the nations in the holy child

who is greeted and worshipped by the Magi. But God's revelation of himself is infinitely greater than a moment of individual seeing. The Epiphany comes to us, the revelation is made to us, not in that act of visual apprehension but in the narrative through which we encounter the person of Jesus Christ, the narrative of the gospel stories as a whole. If all we have is an isolated moment of seeing, we will be unlikely to make sense of that which we have seen. We are able to celebrate the moment of the Epiphany only because we have already had so many other moments in the story, and only because there are so many more moments to come.

God's manifestation of himself is not a magic trick, it does not go off with a bang and then cease. Likewise God's relationship of love with the world which he created is not something which begins in the reign of Herod the Great and ends around 30AD. Rather, in Christ God shows us that he has concentrated his love in the person of a human being, has revealed to us that

if we want to know what God is like, the first and essential thing to do always and everywhere is to look to Jesus. Jesus himself becomes then not just the revelation, the thing which is shown to us, but also the medium of all else that we are shown, the glass through which we can discern God at work in the world. And so the Epiphany celebrates the focus of all that we know about God, it crystallizes our thanksgiving for every moment of truth and revelation, just as the history of the life, death and resurrection of Christ crystallizes and contains all the truth about God which is always and everywhere true for all people. It is a moment, but it is not the whole story.

Today we recount the narrative of the Wise Men and their gifts to the Christ child. Gold for splendour and kingly majesty, incense for holiness and the presence of God. Those two gifts which we think so suitable and royal are in fact bizarre beyond words, because they are being given to the insignificant child of a teenage

mother. To proclaim a baby with the symbolism of royalty and temple is publicly to state something which seems as far from truth as can be. Those are the contrasts of the present, but the contrast of the future is myrrh, the third gift, the embalming fluid, the undertakers potion which is given to the newborn in the presence of his earthly parents. This is the equivalent of entering a maternity ward and presenting a burial wreath. This strangest of the three gifts is, perhaps, the least surprising, for this child is not born a prince or a priest, but another nothing in a world of pomp and power.

And that gloomiest of gifts is a sign of so much else. First, what ought to be obvious, that this child is really a child – death is what all human beings have in common. This is not a superhero. But the myrrh is also a sign this child is to be encountered in death as well as in life. This initial act of viewing is not, in other words, the final version. The fullest revelation of the divine which we celebrate in Jesus Christ is never

just one part of the story. When the wise men come to Jerusalem seeking the child, they ask a very particular question; “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” And that phrase – King of the Jews – does not appear again in Matthew’s gospel until it is hung at the top of the cross.