

Epiphany 2017

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Matthew 2.1-12

The fact that we live in a media age is hard to avoid. Of course, if one thinks about it, all human beings have lived in media ages, the important thing being the changes in and development of the media by which human beings communicate. Perhaps if we use the phrase “mass media” we are closer to the truth, and the explosion of the electronic in the last half century or so has not failed to touch most aspects of human living, faith and religion among them. One consequence of this is the dominance of the visual. Indeed, one of the reasons we struggle with the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity is that we can't represent visually something being both three and one. We can far more effectively make that representation aurally, through music, but our image obsessed world won't be satisfied by sound alone.

This determination to see things, our incessant repetition of the demand “Show me”, ought to find its theological home in

this Feast of the Epiphany. After all, Epiphany just means – showing, revelation, manifestation. The Christ child is revealed to the magi, who have travelled from a distant land on seeing the star which tells of his birth. Thus the revelation of the Christ not just to his own people, but to the Gentile world, and by implication all of humanity, is what we mark this morning. For once, God seems to be meeting us where we would like, doing what we ask. Show yourself, we are saying. And he obliges.

All well and good, perhaps, except that we forget our human tendency never to be satisfied. While images might dominate our consumer driven world, the desire for gratification is at least as significant. The more we can see, the more we want to see, just as the more we consume, the more we want to consume, so that the history of human experience becomes not the constant learning by engagement and relationship with the other – the other person, the other culture, the other idea, the other perspective – but by the consumption of information, which we take as we choose even as we reach out for more. That which we think we are learning is really simply one hit or high after another, a sensation so fleeting that we hardly

remember it in the instant we move on to the next pseudo-satisfaction.

Manifestation, or revelation, on its own cannot be enough. We need context and content in order to learn. If I simply turn on an incredibly bright light in a darkened room, and then turn it off again, all I will achieve is hurting my eyes. I won't properly see anything, still less make sense of the surroundings in which I find myself. My eyes need to be accustomed to the light, just as they need to be accustomed to the dark when that light is absent. Likewise, in order to understand something, I need a framework in which to place it. The construction of that framework will, if I am not careful, prejudice or pre-decide that act of understanding which I am supposed to have undertaken. If I decide in advance what the unknown must be like, I will prepare a place for that unknown which matches my preconceptions. I will not be allowing myself properly to learn.

The Christmas story shows us both divine and human frameworks being constructed. Think, for a moment, of what we call that Christmas story. You will find it nowhere in the

gospels. What we do find, is two quite distinct and contrasting narratives, one in Matthew and one in Luke. They have important things in common – the virginal conception of Jesus, the angelic messages concerning his birth and identity – but they also differ hugely. In Matthew everything happens to Joseph, there is no journey to Bethlehem, Jesus is born in a house, and some strange Eastern sages called magi – it doesn't say how many, there might have been forty three of them – come to see him having followed a star. In Luke, everything happens to Mary, she and Joseph journey to Bethlehem because of a census, Jesus is laid in a manger and some poor nightworking shepherds come to see him having been instructed by an angel.

There's nothing wrong with these contrasts – two differing narrative reflections on the point of central importance: who this child is, and what God is doing. But by moulding them together in our carol services and our nativity plays we make it that much easier to sanitise the story, and we end up with the all too familiar baby Jesus who is about ten months old, with blue eyes and curly blond hair, who smiles all the time and, in the heretical teaching of *Away in a Manger*, is the only

baby in the world who doesn't cry. Because we know this child is special, we are determined to make him appear different. So we have created our own context for his arrival, a context which prejudges what he is like.

How safe, and how sensible. Far more sensible than allowing God to be God, to reveal himself as he is, rather than as we'd like him to be. Instead, assuming happily for ourselves what God must be like, we paint our own picture and force God into the middle of it. And that, we claim, is an epiphany, a revelation. But of course, it is not. Our problem is our refusal to accept that God has already provided the context, the framework, for his manifestation. He has already laid the foundations for the narrative he is building. He has done this and continues to do this in every moment of human existence, in reaching out to the world which rejects him, in his siding with the orphan and the widow and the tiny insignificant country surrounded by the ancient super powers. More importantly, he has done this simply by creating the world, by providing us with the gift of life which is the context for his manifestation.

For what, after all, is shown in this great act of revelation? What is it that these sages get to see, what flash of brilliant light illuminates the world as God makes himself known to the Gentiles? The answer, of course, is all too ordinary. What they see, is a new born child. Not glowing with a halo, not shining like a star, not smiling seraphically and offering a blessing with his oh so tiny hand. None of this marks God's showing us himself. Instead we see dependence, vulnerability, the smallest of persons, needy, hungry, dirty, smelly and screaming. We see God in the weakness of a baby. We see God helpless among us. Let us hope we can pay attention.