

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Epiphany

readings: [Isaiah 60.1-6](#), [Ephesians 3.1-12](#), [Matthew 2.1-12](#)

7 January 2024

While I have your attention, I'm going to start at the end today. I'm going to summarise and say that the purpose of the Epiphany story, at least as I understand St Matthew's motivation, is to drive the idea that religious people and priests do not have a monopoly on God's message. God's love is universal and we'd do well to pay attention to God moving and acting in unexpected people and places.

Having said that, let me tell you that I love the Epiphany story, Mainly because it is one of the messiest in the Bible! On the surface of it...

1. There are powerful people who come to worship at the feet of a powerless baby – but we know that all is not as it seems – the baby is more than he appears to be.
2. These Magi are wise people and yet they misread the signs and end up at the wrong place.
3. The one trying to pervert their success (the king), ends up being the one to ensure they reach their destination.
4. The priests who should have been able to see and read the signs hadn't (and even after they do, do nothing about them). So it is foreigners, those outside the Law, and therefore technically outside God's Covenant, who see the glory of God.

Nothing is as it appears to be in this story. It's a mess.

It's glorious!

Now, let me tell you about a more recent story...

I went to Suffolk over the holidays. Had a lovely time catching up with family and friends. On New Year's day, my husband and I, were walking around Norwich, killing time before making our way to the football ground – his birthday present! It was cold but the drizzle had abated somewhat and so we meandered around the cobbled streets. As we turned a corner, a woman of indetermined age, approached us. She may have been young but it was impossible to tell as she was very underweight, and shaking badly from what appeared to be drug withdrawal symptoms. She looked cold, dirty, distressed, bedraggled, pushing an old bicycle. She begged us for some money to get something to eat or to keep warm, she said: "I know I'm smelly, and I'm humiliating myself but I'm so cold, please help me". We were so stunned, we didn't move or speak for a little while. Then the realisation dawned that we didn't actually have any cash on us, we very seldom carry any these days, as we just weren't going to be able to help her in the way she needed. I don't even know Norwich, so couldn't even signpost her to anywhere for help... She moved on resigned, crying softly and my heart broke in a million pieces. From pity and anger at her unspeakable situation but mostly from shame. Societal shame that allows those on the margins to remain there. And my own, personal shame, that perhaps I had just let my own Lord walk on, untouched, cold and hungry, in pain and desperate. And me a vicar, a good person... unable or unwilling to help "them".

I'm going to argue that maybe my thinking, and my theology, were a bit muddled by the shock of the encounter... this is why.

Over the years I have met many a woman and man fallen on hard times. Some of whom had pulled themselves out of despair with the help of others, often through church or charity initiatives such as care for the homeless or the lonely or whatever. Once I had got to know them, I would often ask them about

their experiences. What was the worst moment? Whose help had made the difference? What was it like to feel that alone? Often their stories of recovery were amazing and they embodied everything one could dream of about getting involved with any charity or good cause. They were talented people, often struck down by childhood trauma or unforeseen circumstances, who, with the help of wise companions, like charity volunteers, found sanctuary, regained confidence, got back on their feet, and learned to live again. All this is good but I fear that these sorts of encounters further entrenched my thinking that, somehow, there are some people who may benefit from my ability to save “them”.

Let me describe a different encounter. Once, while doing a shift at a rehousing charity, I asked a volunteer colleague, whom I had worked with on a few shifts, why he did the work he did - helping others like he did. ‘Oh,’ he said, I do it because I used to be like you. ‘I went to university. I used to drink a lot, as people do at uni. Except, when we all left, and the others stopped, I didn’t stop. I went the other way. I drank more. I had a great life. I was a bio-chemist and managed to hold down my job for an amazingly long time, even though I’d drive into town at four in the morning to find a place to buy booze. I was married but to be honest I can’t believe she stuck with me so long. She used to throw me out and I’d come back. Eventually she meant it. And I couldn’t see my children. I can’t talk to them now. I lost all my friends long ago.

‘You think I volunteer here. I don’t. I live here. I’ve been here almost two years. Took me weeks to sober up. So, I help out, in what I can. But don’t get me wrong. I’m an alcoholic. Don’t be fooled. I can wear your clothes, walk and talk like you Carla. But I’m the worst nightmare of all your imagined futures.’

I was stunned. I was a vicar. I’d been forever preaching about how to live “tidy” lives and still give back. Because at heart, whatever I thought I believed, I was living as if there was “them” (others in need) and there was “us”. But this man: he was both.

He destroyed any notion I might have had that “social engagement” was the rich, the good, the “haves” reaching out to the needy.

And this brings me back to the Epiphany story...

This God-with-us makes for an untidy, messy reality. I like the image of Jesus of the crib story and the carols:

Glorious now, behold him arise,

king and God, and sacrifice...

But what we often get is lost Magi looking in palaces... Alcoholic Charity volunteers... God, born defenceless, nursed in the arms of a girl-child, soon to be a refugee. A woman, homeless and shaking from drug withdrawal, drawing me to God.

The truth only appears when you see beyond appearances. God help us.

What a mess.

What glory.

What an epiphany.

Sermon inspired by personal encounters and a sermon from The Rev Dr Sam Wells, Epiphany 2019.

See: Epiphany Carols - St Martin-in-the-Fields

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