



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Epiphany

readings: Isaiah 60 1-6; Ephesians 3 1-12; Matthew 2 1-12

8<sup>th</sup> January 2023

It was the coldest night of my life. It was the only night in which I have felt the need to go to bed in this country wearing a bobble hat! Some years ago, in late October, we had rented an isolated cottage on the moors above Blanchland in Northumberland from a friend of a friend. We were warned that its central heating worked from a back boiler in the log fire which had to be constantly fed (logs would be provided). But we were not warned that the central heating didn't really reach upstairs to the bedrooms.

Driven from bed in the middle of the night by the cold, I peered through the curtains to see the dark sky ablaze with bright stars. The sight took my breath away. I stood silent in awe and wonder at the light.

*Epiphany is about light:* the light of a star and the Light of Christ. A light to engender awe and wonder at the sight. A light to enlighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of his people, Israel.

It was a light that had first attracted the shepherds, those on the margins of the chosen people, drawn to come and worship the new born king: the Light of the World, drawn by the glory of the Lord that shone round about them.

It was the light of a single star that drew the wise men to Jesus. Representatives of worldly wisdom, Gentiles, drawn to look up from the earthly arena of their knowledge and expertise to grasp a bigger perspective. The star led them out of their comfort zone, out of their safe spaces of knowledge and experience, it led them to a strange new context, a stable in Bethlehem, drawing them to focus down on to the basics: ~ a little child, new born, struggling for life against the odds. Wise men, benevolent kings, called to look *up* to the Light of Heaven, and then to look *down* into the depths of the human struggle to survive, a struggle which is still the agenda of the human condition for so many in our world today; and then to look *out*, to see that the gospel message is there for the whole wide world. A world drawn to see in these triple perspectives: up, down, and out, which together make the sign of the Cross, that it is Epiphany which connects Christmas with Easter, offering us new hope, new light, and new life.

This new life is pure innovation: a new way of synthesis, joining the biggest vision of transformation with the smallest struggle for survival. Innovation is not just change; it contains change but it cannot constrain it.

The wise men recognised this new life as a container within which to offer their awareness of the financial costs of change (symbolised by the offering of gold), their awareness of the spiritual costs of change (symbolised by frankincense), and their awareness of the sacrificial costs of change (symbolised by myrrh).

The wise men were *stargazers*. It was the light of a star that led them to the Light of Christ. It was the Light of Christ that would illuminate their lives, cast out the shadows, turn their darkness into light. So that with hearts on fire, they left by another way: transformed and awakened.

So inspired by this sense of innovation, I make no apology for continuing this sermon by sharing with you, at some length, the prose poem "*Stargazers*" by Hilary Faith Jones, from her book "*Awakenings*", which takes the age-old story of the wise men, transforms them into an unexpected cast of characters, and translates them into a modern-day context.

“It was the old man who first spotted it.  
All year it had been most disturbing – the strange patterns,  
the different dances that the great stars were weaving,  
auras and lights that had no precedence.

Until one magnificent evening as the light began to fall,  
he had stood upon his castle balcony and had seen it with his naked eye,  
a great shining diamond just above the horizon.  
And his heart had leapt with a strange mixture of incredulous joy and terrifying awe.

As his private jet flew to Palestine, he wondered how many of the others would be there.  
Not that he enjoyed their company. In fact they made him glad he lived in isolation,  
perched on the top of his mountain.  
And then, suddenly, he remembered that star  
and his heart leapt strangely again  
and his mind dwelt on its meaning.

He had been there a matter of hours before *she* arrived.  
Her long limousine slowed to an elegant stop.  
Her chauffeur bowed low over her door, the crowd gasped and cameras flashed,  
as she gracefully unfurled her legs to step into the bright sunlight.

He had to admit to being rather surprised.  
Of them all he would have thought she would be the last to understand,  
she of the Parisian suits and chic hair, shimmering smoothly in the world of television,  
surrounded by sparking publicity and adoring fans.

And then, above the razzmatazz, their eyes met.  
And for a moment, he saw a light in them that no staging could create.  
She too had clearly seen the star.

When the other arrived, he could not help but sigh.  
Why did this young protégé always engender such despair?  
Torn off shorts, worn-through trainers, a single glittering earring,  
shaved head except for a ponytail rising ridiculously from the centre of his bald dome.  
But there he was, leaning dangerously out of the train window,  
waving vigorously to them both, falling over the platform in his haste.  
And the delight of the star was shining out of his face.

They went of course to the palace, but to no avail.  
King was suave, polished, and utterly shallow,  
And so they slipped away from the court and the crowds,  
walked quietly, watching,  
always watching the great star that spun before them.

Seedy hotel, run-down, full of rowdy lager louts.  
They avoided the glaring lights and the beer and the noise,  
made their way round the back, past dustbins, and drunken couples,  
and suddenly found what they were looking for.  
The startled gaze of a man holding a tired girl  
clutching in wonder a tiny babe.

And down in that littered back yard, the wealthy man slowly knelt,  
and speechlessly offered his gold.  
And in awe, the woman undid her hair and let it fall luxuriantly to her feet,  
as she simply held out perfume.  
And the brilliant young man crouched at the side of the girl,  
with a face translucent with joy, and with pain,  
and offered the child myrrh.

They left as quietly as they had come,  
and climbed the hill together,  
pausing at the top before they parted company.  
They knew their lives had been changed ~  
for they had answered the sign, and they had looked upon the face of God,  
fleeting seen something of the wisdom, the folly, the power, the vulnerability, the magnificence.

And now they were bound to each other ~ hearts on fire.  
“God is with us” whispered the wealthy man  
and in the dark the woman’s hand found his.  
But the young man looked upon the crowded city,  
then up at the glory of the stars,  
and with his feet firmly on the ground,  
he flung his arms to heaven:  
“*Emmanuel!*  
God with us!”

**Hilary Faith Jones: “Stargazers”**  
**in “Awakenings: Stories and Prayers”**  
**(Leprosy Mission International, 1999)**

Epiphany marks the coda of Christmas celebration. “Our revels now are ended” and the work resumes.  
Epiphany Eve, Twelfth Night, has seen decorations down, trees disrobed, cards recycled, gifts all given.  
The angels “gone away”, the shepherds “returned”, the magi “departed”.

But one gift remains, the gift of God in Christ, Emmanuel, “God with us”, now and forever.

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