

Epiphany

Have you ever had an epiphany, a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become aware of, something that is very important to you? There are many examples of such experiences. A person who always blames others for their problems suddenly realises that they have to take responsibility for their own actions. A person who is continuously setting goals abruptly appreciates that the journey of life is at least as important as the goal to which they are headed. Someone who has always wanted to get rich grasps the fact that love and relationships are far more important than wealth. You can probably name a number of similar epiphanies in your own lives. I know I can. I vividly recollect as a child suddenly being struck by the wonder of existence while in a wood with the wind blowing through the trees. I remember as a teenager feeling that Jesus was speaking to me as I read a particular passage in the Bible. I recall falling in love at first sight. I remember reading Thomas Hardy for the first time and being 'blown away'. I recall discovering the operas of Richard Wagner and being overcome by the power and wonder of his music. My list could go on and I expect many of you, if you thought about it, could put together similar lists.

Some of the epiphanies I mentioned were of a religious character, some weren't. The word epiphany means a sudden revelation or manifestation and these can be secular or religious. History records a wide range of epiphanies. Two notable ones that come to mind are Archimedes' eureka moment while he was having a bath and Isaac Newton's alleged discovery of gravity when hit on the head by a falling apple! While writing this sermon I watched the film *Love Actually* for about the hundredth time and noting that it contains an epiphany. The aging rock star Billy Mack, played by Bill Nighy, is suddenly struck by the fact that the 'love of his life' is in fact none other than his chubby roadie and manager Joe, played by Gregor Fisher. Writers often incorporate epiphanies in their stories. In *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, Cathy has an epiphanous moment when she cries out 'I am Heathcliffe!', underlining the intense, unbreakable love between the two. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Angel suddenly realises that he has deeply wronged his wife and immediately sets off to repair the damage, tragically arriving 'too late'. James Joyce used the term epiphany explicitly in many of his works, while William Wordsworth must surely be the great poet of epiphanies, even if he did not use the term explicitly.

He referred to ‘spots of time’ when the natural world opened up things infinite and eternal. For him the wonders of nature, the simple and the grand, daffodils, birds, rainbows, a flowing river, could give a glimpse of divinity. He prized and captured these moments of deep insight in his poetry. We too should prize our epiphanies, whatever kind they are, as they can bring us similar insights into ourselves, our world and ultimately, our God.

There are, of course, many moments of epiphany in the Bible and I sometimes think that the feast of the Epiphany should not simply be a celebration of the visit of the Magi. In fact, in some Christian traditions there is a greater emphasis on the Baptism of Christ as the great epiphany event. In the Prayer Book the water into wine miracle is also seen as an epiphany. But in fact, as I said, there are many epiphanies throughout the Bible. These are but a few examples: there are the encounters between God and the patriarchs, there are the various experiences Moses has of God beginning with the burning bush. Then you have the story of the night call of Samuel. Elijah’s encounter with God in the ‘still small voice’ is an epiphany and so too are most of the prophetic call narratives. Many of the prophets receive visions, such as Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones and Daniel’s apocalyptic night visions – these are all types of epiphanies. In the New Testament there are numerous epiphanies besides the ones I have already mentioned. The story of the transfiguration must surely be one, as are all the resurrection stories. Think of the moment the disciples knew Jesus when he broke bread at Emmaus, for example. The conversion of Paul, which we happily celebrate in the Epiphany season, is another. Some, though not all, of the miracles have an epiphanous effect, as when after Jesus stills of the storm, his disciples say, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

I have said already that some epiphanies are religious, some are not. Of those which are religious or spiritual we must ask an important question: do these epiphanies come from God or are they principally the product of the human mind? Believers see religious epiphanies as revelations given by God to humanity, disclosing something of his nature and purpose. An alternative, non-religious approach regards them as arising in the mind, either as interpretations of natural but unusual events or simply products of the imagination. But can they not be both? It seems to me that many of those who experience a spiritual epiphany are people who are already attuned to be sensitive to God’s presence. They will be people like Samuel who in response to the call of God replied, ‘speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’. So we can believe that these epiphanies come from God but are channelled through people whose minds are

more prone to receive them than others. This surely is true of the classic epiphany story about which I have said very little so far this morning, the epiphany of the Magi. The inner meaning of this story is all about sensitivity to God. These mysterious strangers from the east were so attuned to God's presence in the world that they sought to acknowledge that presence in the child Jesus. Furthermore, the traditional interpretation that the magi were representative of the gentile world shows that spiritual epiphanies can occur outside the church, even outside conventional religion altogether. Wherever people seek God he may reveal himself to them.

What a religious epiphany does is to reveal the world as it truly is, as shot through with the presence of God. The truth is that God is always present. This is summed up in the title applied to Jesus in Matthew's gospel, Emmanuel, 'God with us'. God is with us and indeed with and within his entire creation in the fullest sense possible. Our part is open our minds to his presence. There are many ways Christians can do this. We can do it in worship, above all in the worship of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist Christ's presence in all things is focussed in his presence in the bread and wine and also, in a slightly different way, in the presiding priest, the people of God and the Scriptures. We can also open our minds to God's presence by seeking God in the wonderful world all around us. Two Victorian poets sum this idea up powerfully. In *Aurora Leigh* Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.

while in another poem Christina Rossetti writes,

Tread softly! All the earth is holy ground.
It may be, could we look with seeing eyes,
This spot we stand on is a Paradise.'

We can also see God in other people and find his presence in even the humblest of our fellow human beings. It was said of Mother Teresa of Calcutta that she looked at the lowliest and most degraded human beings in the same way as she looked at the host in the Mass and saw the body of Christ in each. As we love our neighbours we are loving the God who made us all in his image and acknowledging that image in them.

If we are open to God's presence in these and other ways there is no reason why we, like prophets and saints of old should not receive religious epiphanies, special moments when the continuous presence of God becomes conspicuous, when we are deeply aware of his reality and his love. For some this conspicuous sense of God's presence is a recurrent experience. For many of us, however, it is much more rare, most of the time it feels almost completely hidden. But we should not lose hope that, despite its apparent hiddenness, God is present and epiphanies can occur. Perhaps this has been nowhere better expressed than in that magnificent poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, in which he acknowledges that although we often fail to recognise God's presence in nature, we do not 'reck his rod' as he puts it, there is, nevertheless a shining hope of an epiphany:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.