

Epiphany 2019: The Surprise

My husband's family play a game called 'adverbs' at Christmas, in which someone has to guess the adverb hidden in the style in which the other players answer his or her questions, whether frostily, humorously, softly, naughtily and so on. When it was my turn, they kept exclaiming, discovering new things, shouting, 'eureka', and practically knocking themselves on the head with amazement. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realise that the adverb they were acting out was epiphanically. I had quite forgotten what an element of surprise there is in this feast.

For the Epiphany does come as a surprise both to those characters involved in its original events and to us joining in liturgically. The intimate pastoral nativity of shepherds and animals breathing over the Christ Child in the manger gives way to an utterly different scene. We are so used to the birth narratives that we forget how very strange they are and how contrasted. Now the story opens to vast vistas of camel-trains crossing the desert, carrying rich gifts and important, dignified priest scientists, the Zoroastrian magi following a star through the spangled glory a night-sky presented in a world without electricity. We call the feast of their arrival Epiphany, a showing, but we forget how far an epiphany is pure surprise.

Among the characters, Herod had a very unpleasant shock to learn of a kingly rival in the small back-water of Bethlehem; Mary had a more pleasant but quite bewildering surprise when she was visited while alone with her child by these exotic strangers with their bizarre and even threatening presents; the wise men had all their ideas about power and kingship overturned by the goal of their quest falling quite outside the royal palace. Amazement is the key emotion of the story.

Traditionally Epiphany covers two other stories in the life of Jesus: his baptism and the miracle at the wedding-feast at Cana. They too are amazing stories. It is astonishing that Jesus should seek baptism from John, and that a divine voice acknowledges him; the turning of water into wine is an astonishing sign. It is all wonder, surprise, epiphany.

If we today are to experience this wonder, to have an epiphany, we have to enter fully into it as I had to give myself to the Christmas Adverb game. We have to trust these bizarre stories, in a world that is too bound to a limited understanding of possibility to be able to bend to the stable door or see meaning in the planetary conjunctions. One of the most depressing tendencies of the century in which we live is how our public conversation and our thought in any area of life is able to imagine difference: that there might be different ways of living, of making money, of generating energy, of dressing, building, thinking and writing, let alone that there might be a dimension to life beyond the physical or that faced by the Incarnation stars as well as people might be drawn towards the Christ Child. Stars have become dead things to our time, no longer our companions. Despite the language of radicalism in our day there is a great sameness, even a fatalism, in our discourse as if nothing could ever be different. For example, children and adults alike are ever less likely to study foreign languages, which is a great pity because through inhabiting a new language, you come to learn that there are other ways of imagining and living apart from your own. Shackled like this, no wonder we are unable to experience the transformation that Epiphany offers us. We are incapable of being surprised.

Epiphany offers us a great surprise because it shows us the whole universe acknowledging the kingship of Christ. Through the star, the cosmic order witnesses to him; the water turns to wine, showing the earthly transformed by his presence; in the Magi all humanity comes to attest his divinity: 'nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn' as Isaiah foretells; in Christ's baptism the chaotic forces of the world own his rule. It is like being taken round behind the scenes of the universe, drawing aside the curtain of the cosmic theatre to see things as they really are.

So what is real? Jesus, the little baby who is God with us, and that is the most solid reality. It means a new source of revelation and light for us, that can turn the water of drabness into the best vintage, that can bring the great to their knees, that can transform you and me into princes and princesses better than any pantomime transformation scene, and which ends, like all the best fairy-stories with a wedding. We

are familiar with the way that the gifts of the magi can be read as pointing to Jesus's adult life and his destiny: the gold to his kingship, the incense to his priesthood and the myrrh to his anointing for burial. The early Christians read them also as wedding gifts, signs of the union of Christ and his Church. There is an ancient prayer from Lauds on Epiphany Day:

This day the Church is joined to her heavenly Spouse, for Christ has cleansed her crimes in the Jordan. With gifts the Magi hasten to the royal nuptials, and the guests are gladdened with wine made from water.

Epiphany is a surprise because it looks forward to the whole of Jesus's life right up to the wedding of the lamb at the end of time. It is all concertinaed together, so that the magi prefigure the women at the tomb on Easter Day as well as the guests at the Cana wedding, and we collectively are the spouse, the bride, who anticipate this heavenly wedding banquet here at the altar where we drink wine together, having brought up our own gifts.

I have said that we need to imagine difference, to be humble enough to believe that God in Christ acted to give us miraculous signs like wine from water and great men like the magi bending their knee to a mere child. Our failure to have true wonder, however, is not just a lack of intellectual humility. It is also a failure to make full use of our intellect and our imagination. The Magi followed a star not out of superstition but careful research and analysis. They were scientists and philosopher theologians who saw the two subjects as related. It was following truth as far as it would go that led them on their journey. Any scientist must have a theory, imagine a possibility, before it can be tested by experiment. All knowledge in that sense is poetry and scientists need imagination every bit as much as artists or musicians. For to make real breakthroughs, you must be ready for any possibility and the highly improbable, not to say impossible, and only with this openness can you have an epiphany: a eureka moment.

If we are to have a future as a society then we all need to enter this new year ready to be surprised, open to imagining difference, and prepared to encounter miracle. 'For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will rise

upon you and his glory will appear over you'. The temperature, the weather people tell us, is falling, and we shall have some crisp clear nights. Let us like the wise men look up to that glorious display God has made for our delight and find a star, for every one of them will lead us to Christ. Fix your imagination on that star, shining across thousands upon thousands of years upon you. Its scientific truth is itself wonderful, but it becomes yet more wonderful when seen as God's beautiful ordering. And vow to allow yourself to be surprised this year, surprised, I hope, by joy, that Christ is born of Mary and the world holds God as he holds the world, and you and I are part of a story – a mystery Paul calls it - whose denouement will be more surprising than we can possibly know.

And I invite you also to take part in the traditional blessing of your home as a sign of this commitment, that you may be ready to welcome surprise. Take a piece of the blessed chalk at the back of the church and use the prayer in the Pew News to bless your home, witnessing to your neighbours that this, like the dwelling of Christ at Bethlehem, is a place of epiphany, where anything is possible, where faith, hope and love dwell.

Using the blessed chalk mark the lintel of your front door (or front porch step) as follows:

20 + C + M + B + 19 while saying:

The three Wise Men, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar followed the star of God's Son who became human two thousand and nineteen years ago. May Christ bless our home and remain with us throughout the new year. Amen.

And may this be a year in which you also, like Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, may be surprised by joy. Amen.