

A Light Shining in the Darkness - Some thoughts on Epiphany – Rev Paul Day

The plan for this week was to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany with a communion service in St James Church, and then to start a new series of midweek reflections looking at the seven miracles or signs of Christ's glory in John's gospel. But as with so much in these last few months, things are not going strictly to plan. Because of the rising rate of Covid infections the PCC have decided to suspend public worship for the time being, and so we will not be meeting in St James Church for Epiphany. So it seems fitting to mark the feast of the Epiphany with some thoughts as our midweek reflection this week and begin the series on the signs from John's gospel next week.

One of our favourite Christmas films is Love Actually – it's one of our traditions that we watch it sometime every year in the build up to Christmas. It's a film which shows that love is the driving force in life, and it starts and ends with pictures of people greeting each other at Heathrow Airport. Demonstrations of love and affection, and of joy and happiness.

And it's just about the only film I know where the word Epiphany occurs. Not in a religious setting, but in the sense of a moment of sudden understanding realisation or revelation – like a light shining in the darkness

In the film Bill Nighy plays the aging rock star Billy Mack, whose crass Christmas record – Christmas is all around us – has made it to number 1 in the charts. We see Billy Mack returning early on Christmas morning from Elton John's celebrity-filled and wine-fuelled party to the dark depressing bed sit room where his fat manager (played by Gregor Fisher) is 'celebrating' Christmas alone. He comes in and says that he has had an epiphany.

Suddenly a light has shone in the darkness for him. He is able to see things clearly for the first time. The fripperies at Elton John's party are just that – meaningless and superficial. The real love, the real feelings he has, the feelings of love and affection that inspire and motivate him – are for his lifetime colleague with whom he has gone through countless highs and lows over the years. This fat manager. And it was him he wanted to spend Christmas with. Friendships are more important than frivolity.

In Christian understanding we tend to associate the feast of the Epiphany with the coming of the wise men bringing gifts to the infant Jesus. It's about Jesus being revealed to the Gentiles; and the wise men in the story are the

representatives of the non Jewish peoples. The dictionary definition of the word epiphany is about light in darkness, a sudden moment of insight and understanding, a revelation. It's not difficult to see that there is a clear connection between the two.

The wise men had an epiphany moment - a realisation of the truth, a revelation. They were studying the stars and looking for some kind of interpretation in what they saw. And when – as is quite likely to have been the case – the planets Jupiter (the royal planet) and Saturn (associated with the Jews) were in conjunction (just as they were this Christmas time – you may have seen them yourself) the conclusion for them was clear – a new King of the Jews was born. Light dawned. And it was a far greater and more far reaching light than they could possibly have imagined as this King was more than the King of the Jews. A literal light shining in the darkness leading them to the baby Jesus and leading them to a new perspective on life and everything.

But on a wider level, the very event of Jesus being worshipped by these foreigners, these wise men from distant lands - is itself an epiphany – a revelation – to the world. It's the moment when the story of God's dealings with the human race move from being with the particular nation of Israel to being with the whole world. Those who came to worship the baby Jesus were the outcasts (shepherds whose work and lifestyle made them unclean) and the foreigners (the magi or wise men from the east). Representatives of the whole world come to worship Jesus who is not just King of the Jews but the King of the entire world. A light shines in the darkness for the whole world.

Epiphany moments – lights shining in darkness. Some come out of the blue – Bill Nighy's for example in the film. The apostle Paul's on the road to Damascus is another example. Moses meeting God in the burning bush in the desert is another. Lives are changed without expectation or preparation. But I suspect that most of these moments come to people who are, in some way, watching and searching – a bit like the wise men.

And what about us? What about the churches in this parish? Are we looking for epiphany moments; times when God speaks some new or fresh insight to us? Words or visions or thoughts that might change our lives; words or thoughts that could bring new direction and purpose to us or the church; something that could bring light into our darkness? Words or thoughts that could help us show the light of Christ to those around us?

Maybe you can think of times when this has happened for you – I can certainly think of times when God has broken into my everyday routine and turned things upside down. Times when a light has dawned that has suddenly helped me make sense of the world and made things clear. When a previously unseen door has opened wide and I've been beckoned forwards. Sometimes it has been without any expectation but more often I have been looking for God to speak and have been searching in some way. But the lesson I have learned is that we should always be expecting God to speak.

Because the truth is that God does shine light into the darkness. For individuals, for churches and for communities. We need to be aware of that possibility, to wait for and expect to hear God; to look for the light shining and identify it when it appears. To be ready for our epiphanies.

But all too often we look but do not see; God speaks, but we don't hear his voice amongst the distractions that are all around us; the light shines in the darkness but we are looking the wrong way. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it ..

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.*