



Innocence, mirth and epiphanies

Over New Year I found via a search on Google Books a sermon delivered, here, in this church, in 1880 by Edward Meyrick Goulburn. The title was 'Everlasting Punishment' and in fact it was not just one sermon on that theme *but six*, given on each of the Six First Sundays After Trinity.

The Foyles bookshop website offers the entire volume at just £9.70 but notes that it is 'currently out of stock'. Whether this points to its popularity or scarcity, I don't know. Foyles also offer 29 'Foyality' points, should you be tempted.

Speaking of temptation, it is easy to mock the views of previous ages. I am sure these six sermons were carefully prepared and prayed over. But I doubt they were much fun, and I wonder whether they were *helpful*. You can imagine that a 19th century cleric might be tempted to preach *one* sermon on eternal punishment – *but six? And on consecutive weeks?* (I should admit, in the interest of 'full disclosure', that after a stressful week when someone or other here has got under my skin, I have been *tempted* to preach in support of eternal punishment..).

My, how times change. How *we* can change. Today we celebrate the Epiphany.

The word comes from the Greek and means "manifestation," or "striking appearance" and the revelation it marks is that of the new-born Jesus to the Gentiles in the form of the 'wise men' spoken of in Matthew's Gospel, which we just heard read.

Yet all is not as it may seem with this particular feast. We had better first clear out some of the undergrowth. The Gospel

account of this event is found only in Matthew; it refers to 'wise men' not to 'kings' and it does not say how many there were. Things get embellished or re-worked in the telling.

I came across a delightful example of this. It threw a new light on the Epiphany story. Robertson Davies was a 20th century Canadian author. In his novel *The Rebel Angels* he has the character Yerko say this to The Revd Simon Darcourt: "... 'But Gold was not all. The other kings bring Frank Innocence and Mirth.' Darcourt was startled, then delighted. 'That is very fine, Yerko; is it your own?' 'No, it is in the story. I saw it in New York. The kings say, We bring you Gold, Frank Innocence, and Mirth.'

Epiphany. James Joyce said it was a good word to describe the sudden "revelation of the *whatness* of a thing" when "the soul of the commonest object... seems to us radiant." Joyce spoke of this concerning his book *Stephen Hero*, his first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and said, "By an epiphany [Stephen] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity or speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself."

That description, and particularly its mention of the word 'vulgarity', is a good corrective for respectable folk who expect their epiphanies - indeed all their 'spiritual and religious' experiences - to be served up in china cups or peacefully delivered. It does not always work like that. So-called epiphanies in such forms are rarely connected with the life of the one who for our sake was born in poverty and died on a Cross.

'Come to church and find God' is another example of this style of thinking, often found in parish advertising. It reduces God to some benign *undangerous* presence whose address is coterminous with buildings called churches and whose prime characteristics are peace and comfort.

But you and I know that we are more likely to have our epiphanies in the routine struggles of our common humanity. For, if an illegitimate homeless child was the cover of God's penetration of our human reality, is it not to be expected that God's continuing disclosures to each one of us are also likely to be disguised? Not only disguised but likely to occur in *unlikely* places and by oblique means. And what more unlikely a place than our own, ordinary, unpolished and sometimes mixed-up lives?

Never, please, be drawn into worshipping the God who resides only in 'beautiful and peaceful' 'religious' buildings'; for by extension, this God will only speak to beautiful people in beautiful places. The oddest claim of the Incarnation is that God took a deliberate detour and avoided the cathedrals and temples and synagogues and made an appearance in – well, you know the story well enough.

This is simply fantastic news for those of us who likewise dwell in unpolished places, peripheral places, who may sometimes feel unloved and unlovable, who live well beyond religious buildings.

And think for a moment of Joyce's phrase "the soul of [another]... seems to us radiant." Maybe that is something you are familiar with. For there are days when even the grubbiest of us unknowingly radiates something of the Spirit's presence and purpose. We can see it in others; we must assume it is true also of ourselves, and from that take hope.

The story of the epiphany has special resonance for communities such as ours which emphasise inclusivity. Critics

sometimes mock this as something shaped not by theology but by following recent social trends, a 'rights' mentality driven by grumpy feminists and the 'gay agenda' – whatever that might actually be. What such critics have often not been able to do is understand the experience of those parts of the Body of Christ whose lives have never been woven into the wider narrative of the church or, where they have been, have been distorted and misrepresented. That is undoubtedly true for women. True, too, for LGBT people. And true for many others beyond these groups. In the story of the epiphany it is the distant outsiders who recognise the great disclosure in the new born child.

This is surely brilliant stuff. And it causes me to wonder (not for the first time) how on earth the Church has so often manicured and managed this good news so that many who are 'inside' seem not to grasp its brilliance and many who are 'outside' don't get to hear of it. The meaning of the Incarnation and all the stories about it in the Gospels including that of the Epiphany is that God seeks a radical, sweaty, costly and purposeful relationship with each human life and the created order.

We are sometimes urged to 'count our blessings'. It is often a good thing to do. And, maybe to count also our epiphanies also. We are surrounded by a self-disclosing God who longs to be known. I have come to believe that other dimensions press upon us constantly, and that one of these is a spiritual one. Epiphany may be the word to describe those moments when barriers between ourselves and God are at their thinnest and we ourselves at our most receptive. But as already said, some experiences which open our eyes to God's truth can be costly and leave us bruised. Still, we must try to use those to seek God's fuller and loving revelation to us, not to react harshly ourselves or to close our perceptions and hearts.

Yerko in *The Rebel Angels* offers an unselfconscious re-working of Matthew: "...

'But Gold was not all... The other kings bring Frank Innocence and Mirth.' If renewing your desire to know God is amongst those New Year resolutions, you could do worse than offer frank innocence and mirth. And let these good godly gifts be their own rebuke to claims of 'eternal punishment'.

Of the Gospel story of the Magi the line I value the most is: *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.* We know why, of course.

Herods continue to abound today in their insecurities and their violence as we enter 2018. And there is a Herodian presence in most of us. Our own epiphanies – those times of new insight and understanding – will require that we change course, modify our route, proceed onwards by another road. It is a part of our great adventure with God, and often a wonderful one. Amen

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