



Tame epiphanies are worthless

The epiphany (which we celebrate today) is traditionally about the 'revealing' of Jesus to the world as the Christ child, symbolised by the visit of the ones from the East – the Magi. The purpose of the Gospeller (we just heard the account in Matthew, the only gospel to tell the story) is to make plain that the birth is an important revelation from God; and that this significance is recognised by the non-Jewish world as represented by the mysterious learned visitors.

I feel some serious misgiving when I sense that I have fallen into a kind of trivialisation by repetition when responding to the church calendar; those times when I find myself thinking of the feast or season without looking with and through it to the lived experience of my life – of our lives.

Looking no further than a liturgical Feast or Holy Day is a danger awaiting churchgoers, and in some liturgical junkies you find the condition to be chronic and resistant to treatment.

With that in mind, what can we find in the Feast of the Epiphany that speaks to our condition – something which goes beyond rear-view mirror commemoration and helps us understand ourselves and our times in the light of it? Two broad avenues came to my mind as I thought about this: one personal one collective. But first, let's consider the term: Epiphany.

When used with a capital 'E' it refers to the story of the birth of Jesus. The word comes from a Greek root meaning appearance and manifestation and referred to revelations from the gods.

James Joyce said it was a good word to describe the sudden "revelation of the *whatness* of a thing" when (he continued) "the soul of the commonest object... seems to us radiant."

Speaking of his book *Stephen Hero*, his first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he said "By an epiphany [Stephen] meant a sudden

spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself."

That description, and particularly its mention of the word 'vulgarity', is a corrective to those who expect their epiphanies - indeed all their 'spiritual and religious' experiences - to be served up beautifully packaged and with an accompanying heavenly choir. Most of us know it does not work like that, and so-called epiphanies in such form – a sanitised form we might say - are rarely connected with the life of the one who was born as a 'marginal', in poverty and died on a cross and who between those events showed us something vitally important about life – about purpose, perspective, power, service, healing and love.

It is worth perhaps making a distinction between an epiphany and an 'aha! moment'. An aha moment is a little down the scale maybe; a little more routine; a penny-dropping moment, more casual in nature, relating to more everyday insights. Useful and often helpful but not generally a life-changing thing.

An epiphany is something else altogether: a moment of new insight, truly a revelation, something deeper and more profound. Sometimes peacefully disclosed sometimes not. But always disturbing in the sense of moving things around. And its characteristic is that it either changes us in some way or lays the groundwork for change if we have the resolve and wish to see it through.

I mentioned two avenues that came to mind which may be useful in considering the Feast of the Epiphany and the business of life. I don't mean to suggest that these two things – the feast and our lives – are entirely separate but they are different, and if we are to lift the feast from the pages of ancient scripture, so that a breeze might help give it life in the circumstances of our day, we have to do some imaginative work.

My thought about epiphanies led me to consider them as personal processes and as collective

ones. It is maybe not a helpful distinction because, finally, all insight and change hit us personally. But I found myself thinking about our collective need to waken up to new insights.

2016 left me, as have some earlier years, disheartened by our lack of collective wisdom as a species. Like ants doing our thing, we seem never to enter collective epiphanies and re-order our shared life. There have been moments when a hint of collective epiphanies have appeared: think of the shared wish for a better world expressed in the turning of the tide against slavery, the (partial) emancipation of women, the impulse to found the United Nations; and think too of the consensus which drove the establishment of the Welfare State in Britain after World War 2. Yet there could be so much more, if vast majorities of humans truly came to realise through some tremendous epiphany the value of every person, the horrifying stupidity of war and conflict and nationalism, the harm we are doing to the planet.

All that may be unrealistic (but still to be hoped for and worked for!). Epiphanies are more likely to be personal: that is, each of us with our often threadbare humanity, resistance to change, readiness to blame, hunger for security, acceptance of privilege can nevertheless be sometimes tripped up and surprised by an epiphany. Perhaps by, in Joyce's words, a "sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself." Or maybe by the beauty of love or truth or forgiveness or mercy. Or maybe by a rational exercise of investigation and conclusion, for we are all different, and reach our epiphanies by routes shaped by who we are.

Sometimes we approach them through suffering, sometimes by lightness of being and joy. We must take them as we can, when we can. And then seek to be faithful to them. Rationalised, tamed, re-interpreted and castrated epiphanies are worthless. God grants epiphanies in order to teach and change us, for our good and that of the world.

And a final word, from Matthew: his concluding sentence <in today's reading>. 'And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road' [Matt. 2:12]. We know what it means within Matthew's story, of course: steer clear of that nasty Herod.

Yet it also provides another clue about epiphanies. They require us to change course, to take another road, to make changes to our imagined itinerary. And that is their purpose.

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