

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

The Epiphany of our Lord
7 January 2006

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

Epiphany gifts

I refer you to the front of the Connections weekly newsletter and the Reflection of the Day -
Epiphany: You Can't Go Home Again.

The Magi set out on a trip that would change them forever. Each of us is challenged to do the same. Unlike the Magi, we do not tend to allow stars to divert us to a new and unknown place. Most of us stay inside our private castles and avoid such questionable adventures. An epiphany is not an experience that we can create from within, but one that we can only be open to and receive from another. Epiphanies leave us totally out of control, and they always demand that we change. One wonders if the three kings ever went back home at all. Home base had been taken from them. Epiphanies, thank God, wake us up so we can in fact experience our experiences, learn from them and be transformed by them. This is the journey of holiness. *Richard Rohr ofm in St Anthony Messenger Jan 2001*

An *epiphany* is a sudden realisation or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something. The term is used to signify that the claimant has "found the last piece of the puzzle and now sees the whole picture," or has new information or experience, often insignificant by itself, that illuminates a deeper or numinous foundational frame of reference.

In other words Epiphany is about experience and it is something that comes to us as a gift. It is about experience and gift that I want to talk today. We Anglicans are not strong on experience when it comes to our faith – at least we are not good about sharing our experiences of God. Yet without experience/ encounters with God religion is dry and empty and unsatisfying – and the Incarnation is a reminder if we need it that Christianity is all about personal relationship and encounter with God.

Richard Rohr in the essay from which the reflection on the front of Connections is taken says, "The feast of the Epiphany tells us that from the very beginning Jesus was someone to be personally experienced, and not just mentally agreed upon, proven, accepted or argued about. The categories are entirely different: True human experience demands that the whole person be present and active. In that light, one wonders how many people really *experience* things since we are hardly ever present to experience our own experiences. The word became flesh but, to be honest, we would rather just have the word.

As Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, put it, *all real living is meeting*.

Rohr adds, "If God can be manifest in a baby in a poor stable for the unwanted, then we better be ready for God just about anywhere and in anybody. The letting-go of any attempt to compartmentalize God will always feel dangerous and maybe even like dying. What looks like birth is also and always death in this mystery of faith. And what looks like death, thanks to God, is promised as birth. That explains the foundational optimism of authentic Christianity, and the deep joy of authentic Christians. They are indestructible people.

The Epiphany we celebrate is embodiment itself, the embodiment of God in Christ, that embodiment or enfleshment we call Incarnation - which allows us to see God's image and incarnation everywhere else too. Afterwards, we are out of control, going back home by a different route, yet realigned correctly with what-is. Reality is still the best ally of God, and God always comes disguised as our life.

Which makes Life the gift that it is – which brings me to my second main focus – that of gifts.

The Magi came bearing gifts, strange gifts indeed so Epiphany may be the ideal time for us to stop and think about what sort of gifts would really make a difference to our lives and our world. I am grateful to Nathan Nettleton¹ for the insight that the reading we heard from the prophet Isaiah, which is about the Israelites return home from exile, describes a gift that we all hunger for; a place we can call home; where we know we belong and feel accepted and loved. That need to belong is fundamental to our well-being as humans – it is summed up by the British psychologist John Bowlby when he says each child needs to be given the “blissful certainty of being wanted”.

Victor Hugo is talking about this in his novel, *Les Miserables*, when he describes the plight of Jean Valjean who has just served nineteen years torturous imprisonment for something he hadn't done. Now on his release, he has the look of a large, angry monster. Everywhere he goes he is shunned because he is a former convict. No one will give him a place to stay or anything to eat, and he is becoming desperate. Finally a kind woman points to a door near the church and tells him to knock there. That place, she says, will not turn him away. Without knowing he is knocking on the door of the bishop, Jean bangs violently and enters quickly with these words:

"See here! My name is Jean Valjean. I am convict; I have been nineteen years in the galleys. Four days ago I was set free. During those four days I have walked from Toulon. Today I have walked twelve leagues. When I reached this place this evening I went to an inn, and they sent me away. I went to another inn, they said: 'Get out!' It was the same with another; nobody would have me. I went to the prison, and the turnkey would not let me in. I crept in a dog-kennel; the dog bit me and drove me away as if he had been a man. I am very tired-twelve leagues on foot, and I am so hungry. Can I stay?" "Madame Magloire," said the bishop, "put on another plate." The man took three steps, and came near the lamp which stood on the table. "Stop," he exclaimed, as if he had not been understood. "Everybody has thrust me out; will you receive me? Is this an inn? Can you give me something to eat, and a place to sleep? Have you a stable?" "Madame Magloire," said the bishop, "put some sheets on the bed in the alcove." At last Jean Valjean believed, and his face was transfigured from hardened gloom to a barely comprehending, stupefied joy; a suddenly beautiful face. Nettleton says, "Whether we have spent nineteen years in the dungeons, or have just have been searching for a door that will welcome us, the gift we all hunger for is to find the place where we truly belong."

But there is another gift we all hunger is revealed in Matthew's story of the Magi we have just heard as our Gospel reading. No not the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, these are not gifts most of us yearn for. But we do hunger for something that they found. The text says that at the end of their search they kneel down and worship the child. They have come a long way, and put up with who knows what, and now they have found the one who is the goal of all their searching. What is it they have been searching for? Nettleton suggests, "They have risked all, sacrificed all, and offered all to find that one thing that will infuse their lives with meaning, the one who is the answer to their questions and the goal of all their longing. Isn't that a gift we all crave? To find something or someone that matters, that fulfils us; something or someone next to whom nothing else seems to matter; the one treasure for which no sacrifice or struggle is too great. We would gladly give up many lesser gifts if it means discovering that thing or person or mission worthy of our ultimate devotion."

The important question is. Where can we find the place where we truly belong or the thing that gives life real meaning and purpose? You might expect me to say "right here, in church." Indeed hopefully this is a place where you are accepted without reservation and where you can worship and serve the One who fills all life with meaning. But the reality is that if we just come looking for it, we probably won't find it. The secret is that we have to give these gifts in order to really find them paradoxical though that may seem. If we want this church to be a place where *we* can truly belong, then we have to look at how we can make it such a place for others? If *we* want to find purpose and meaning and devotion here, then we need to look at how do we can help others find the same here? The gifts that really matter this Epiphany are gifts we have to give away before there will be

anything in them for us. In seeking to belong, we provide the safe haven and welcome to others especially the stranger. That means breaking out of our comfort zones to notice and welcome the visitor and stranger, or the person we don't really know though we may have sat with them in church week after week for longer than we care to admit, to make them feel welcome, that they matter – to give them the blissful certainty of being wanted. In hoping for meaning, we share the deep treasures of the heart with others. We let others know when we have experienced something of God. We talk about the difference being a Christian has made is making in our lives I guess what I am saying is that we need to have the openness and trust to risk giving ourselves, that we might offer the gifts that we each of us are so that in Christ we can become gifts to one another and together a gift to the world.

¹ In Gifts That Really Matter *A sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 January 2002 see <http://www.laughingbird.net/WeeklyArchives.html>. The latter part of this sermon is a revised version of that sermon.*