

Epiphany

2 1 11

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face-to-face.

My text may be found at the opening of the second chapter of Matthew, verses 1 & 2: 'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

Happy New Year: 2011 and the start of my fifth year with you as your priest-in-charge. One of the things that I am pleased to have developed since I began back in January 2007 is the Newsletter, copies of which are available at the back of the church or on-line direct to your computer or for download from the website. In it, you can read the first of a new series of articles by a former chaplain, The Revd Donald Pankhurst, entitled 'Desert Island Books' in which Donald chooses five books which he has found to have had enduring relevance for him. Given the title of the series, it seems most appropriate the first should be 'Robinson Crusoe'!

If you were to choose just five books that have made a profound impression on you, what would they be? For me, one would have to be 'A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man' by James Joyce which I studied as Sixth former for A Level. Joyce presents a picture of what it was like for him to grow up in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century with its mixture of religion, politics and sexual awakening. Joyce seems set for a career as a priest but in a moment of clarity, which Joyce terms an epiphany, he realises that his true vocation is to be 'a priest of the eternal imagination' - in other words a writer.

An Epiphany, as Joyce rightly understands the word, is a manifestation, a revelation of the underlying truth of things. For the young Joyce, truth is to be found in the sight of beautiful girl on the shore; for the wise men mentioned at the beginning of Matthew chapter 2, truth is to be found in the appearance of a new star in the night sky. For Joyce and the wise men, such an epiphany is life-changing.

The wise men were wise in the sense that they were Middle Eastern astronomers, astrologers who were familiar with the map of the night sky, the configuration of the constellations, what the shapes meant and how what happened in the heavens reflected what was happening or to happen on the earth below. In the Hermetic tradition, this is reflected in the phrase 'as above so below'. Seeing a new star rising in the East, probably Halley's comet, these men came from the East, probably from modern-day Iraq. They were 'in-the-know'; they had occult knowledge; they knew from the appearance of a new star that Jewish Messiah had

been born so they travelled from east to west to Jerusalem to pay their respects to the new-born child.

But the wise men were met by surprise and apprehension in the court Herod the King because they had turned up at the very place where such news was not welcome. If you are tyrant who preserves power even if it means killing your own relatives, you are hardly likely to be happy to welcome the birth of someone who is likely, in due course, to occupy your throne. So Herod the Great hatched a cunning plan to deceive the wise men, intending to trick them into seeking out the unknown boy and then leading Herod to where he was hidden. In the end, however, it was Herod who was unwise for the wise men, having successfully completed their journey, returned home by another route without ever informing him of their findings. Herod took his revenge by a massacre of the innocents but not before Jesus had been taken to safety in Egypt by Mary and Joseph.

Epiphany is essentially about manifestation: about the fact that God reveals himself to Man; that God who is by definition unknowable, takes the trouble to make himself known to mankind. The principle underlying our faith is that God makes himself known to us by becoming one of us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. That is the exciting heart of Christianity that each one of us as individuals can experience a real and living relationship with the real and living God. That is the message of the star which the wise men saw rising in the east. This star, like the star above our altar that Elizabeth Hannay so loved as a child, is the visible sign of the invisible universe, the epiphany of Immanuel, God with us.

May each of us personal encounter such an epiphany: the truth and reality of the living God who loves us sufficiently to become one of us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 23: Epiphany

