

Sermon Epiphany IV 2007 The showing forth of Our Lord Jesus Christ

In the gospel readings for the Sundays in Epiphany we have some dramatic, even startling, pictures of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Let's start by thinking of the season of Epiphany itself. Like all the seasons of the Church's Year, it has its own character. A winter season like Advent, but a winter season that is not plunging ever darker but one of lengthening light.

We never entirely escape our earliest memories. I remember January afternoons when I was six or seven years old, going with my grandfather on his newspaper round in Armley. When we reached the top of Hedley Street, Granddad would pause and tell me to look out over the jail field: *See, it's a bit lighter than it was last week. As the days lengthen, the cold strengthens.* Every New Year I find myself recollecting those early January days and I can see granddad's hands on the straps of his paper bag. His mittens cut off so his fingers were free to pick the papers out of the bag.

That winter scene, a grimy winter scene with the chimneys over the back-to-back houses pouring smoke, the gas works' siren sounding for the men to end their shift; Armley jail like a great black medieval castle; and behind it higher and blacker the steeple of St Bartholomew's church watching over the suburb like a Victorian grandparent. And the Epiphany hymn-tunes, bright as the frost: *Earth hath many a noble city; O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; Hail to the Lord's Anointed.*

And a couple of winters later, coming home from school and sitting mesmerised staring into the coal fire listening to the wireless serial on *Children's Hour*: it was called *A Box of Delights*. And all through it ran the haunting seasonal music of Hely-Huthchinson's *Carol Symphony*. Ah well, as they say, nostalgia isn't what it used to be! But this is not just an exercise in nostalgia. We most nearly understand words when we incarnate them in things. All explanations are banal and a waste of time. They do not penetrate to the centre of things because explanations demystify. Rather, what is required is for us to enter into the mystery and be possessed by it. That is why sounds and scents and images and half-heard voices from the distant past are so evocative. The words made flesh.

In the same way that we recollect those old voices and the childhood scene in a landscape now changed beyond recognition, we should read the gospel stories of Christ's Epiphany, his showing forth. But not just read them, really recollect them, imagine them; enter their world. See them.

So on Epiphany the wise men come. Imagine the brightness of their lights in the dark stable which is more like a cave. Their movements as they bring out Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. Open your Bible and repeat aloud to yourself those words in that rhythm: *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his Mother...* Repeat those words aloud and you are near the very centre of what it means to pray.

And the next Gospel is from St Luke, the only story we have of the childhood of Christ. Ponder that phrase for a minute. We say briskly *the childhood of Christ*. But pick the phrase up in your hands and hold it. Feel the weight of it. What an astounding phrase it is *the childhood of Christ*. Think, God not quite grown up. And when they

find him in the temple there is that exchange between the child Christ and his Mother: *Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? And the reply How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?* One hardly dare say it, but there is something very much like anger in Mary's words and something very like insolence in the words of the twelve-year-old Christ. You cannot sanitise that exchange. It is utterly real. Because it is so daring in the emotions it ascribes to Jesus and to his Mother, we know that it is true. It's like the crackle of thunder and lightning.

Then St John tells us the story of the water into wine. I recall my Methodist friends in old Leeds telling that it wasn't really wine: *They called it wine, but really it was fruit juice.* Go on, laugh. What a miracle eh? Turning pure water into *Ribena*. No it was real wine – as it says *the best wine*. But the wine does not appear until Jesus has made that other sharp remark to his Mother: *Woman, what have I to do with thee. Mine hour is not yet come.* And the guests are all sitting round drinking their way through 180 gallons of wine over the ten days' wedding celebrations. See their faces and what they are not seeing: that the hour of which Jesus speaks is the hour of his death; and that the best wine saved until the last will be his Blood. And when he sheds his Blood, Mary will be there at the foot of the Cross. And what is on their faces now on Calvary, this Mother and this Son? The recollection of that wedding and the understanding that now his hour has indeed come.

Now last week the story of the centurion at Capernaum who comes and asks Jesus to heal his paralysed son. Capernaum is near Magdala and near where Jesus fed the 5000. Little green hills sloping down to the Sea of Galilee. And the centurion comes to Jesus and says, *Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.* St Matthew would have us believe that a Roman centurion, a commissioned officer in the occupying imperial army, actually comes and addresses this wandering preacher as *Lord*. Again we may be daring and conjecture that even Jesus himself was taken aback at this recognition. The Gospel says as much: *He marvelled.* Think of that exchange. Think of their faces. The centurion out of his mind with anxiety about his servant, imploring, but confident to reel off his whole analogy about authority and how his men obey him – the analogy by which this Gentile, this enemy of Israel, understands the authority of Christ. And Christ stunned by the soldier's understanding and the depth of his faith.

And now today the stilling of the storm and the devils cast out and into the pigs. It took me about a minute to read today's Gospel. Just consider how much violence is packed into that minute: the noise and wildness of the storm and the noise and madness of the battle with the evil spirits, and the deafening din when the pigs run over the cliff. The biggest noise of the lot when *behold the whole city came out to meet Jesus.* The whole city chastising him and telling him to clear off – literally for killing their pig. You see the events. The sea whipped up into a violent cauldron and then, at the word of Christ, the calm after the storm. And the sea flat and green again. The little boats like harpsichords. The thankfulness of the fishermen. The sky clearing and to the west the Golan Heights visible once more and to the north old Mount Hermon and its myriad streams full of rain gurgling into the lake.

The writer James Joyce said of his great novel *Ulysses* that in it he was trying to create epiphanies – brilliant word pictures that would thrill and entrance the reader

with the vividness of their reality. Again Ezra Pound said, *The reader has the right to expect that, as he reads, from time to time he will be refreshed by shards of ecstasy.* These five Gospels of Epiphany – think of them as five ecstatic pictures. And, as you would look at a picture in a gallery or take out a photograph, let any one of these pictures form in your mind. In fact, let it form your mind. Tomorrow choose another picture. And so on. Forget about jabbering and babbling on to God with requests for what you'd like him to do for you. Looking at these Gospel pictures is the life of prayer