

Sermon Epiphany II 2004...

We are in the magical season of Epiphany which means the time when Our Lord was shown forth to the world in a series of astonishing gospel stories. An epiphany is something dazzling, unmistakable. It is not an explanation: it is a showing. Recall one or two epiphanies from your own life. I can remember one Christmas Eve in the frosty Yorkshire countryside, and I was driving to church to get everything ready for the Midnight Mass when I got a puncture. Saying a few quiet words to myself about this, I got out of the car and looked up; and there was the full moon slap bang in the middle of the constellation of Orion. Unforgettable.

Years before I saw Ted Dexter at Headingley facing the legendary Aussie bowler Ray Lindwall. It was the first ball of the match. There was that silence over the whole ground as the bowler begins his run in. Lindwall let fly the most hostile bouncer you've ever seen, straight at Dexter's head. And Dexter smashed it straight over square leg for four. Spectacular. But that really wasn't the epiphany. The epiphany was Lindwall standing half way down the pitch, his hands on his hips – and then smiling and making a deep bow to Ted Dexter who acknowledged the gesture with a twirl of his bat. I tell you, if it had then begun to rain and rain all day, we would have had enough cricket for our money.

Religion is not about making statements or propositions and then saying *Believe this!* Religion is about showing you something – a picture, an image – so wonderful that the truth is beyond doubt. The gospels are full of these pictures and images, these epiphanies. But you have to be alert for them or you will miss them. The great Samuel Coleridge said that we must cultivate *that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith*. In other words, you have to develop and use your imagination. Goethe said that most of us go through life without ever really waking up. The epiphanies are a wake up call.

It's no use just reading the Bible as if it were a sort of spiritual version of a motor car repair manual. The words are there true enough; but you have to put yourself and your whole imaginative concentration into it if you are to get the full juice of the fruit. Look at this gospel today: *And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee*. Put yourself there then. You drive by the Sea of Galilee, 600 feet below sea level. To the north side stands Mount Hermon 9000 feet tall – towering over the whole scene like a Victorian grandparent.

There is a little road by the lakeside and magical road signs: Magdala, Capernaum, Tiberias. Don't go to Magdala. That woman Mary Magdalene. You'll only cry your eyes out. Capernaum – where they let the paralysed man down through a hole in the roof and Jesus said to him, *Thy sins be forgiven thee... arise, take up thy bed and walk*. Now if you open your imagination when you see these road signs, you see the woman weeping and opening the alabaster box which is her heart; you hear the voice of Our Lord echoing over the lake, *Arise, take up thy bed and walk*. And if you turn to your right and look out over the glassy lake you will see little fragile boats resembling 18th century musical instruments.

These are epiphanies, showings. Now here is a marvellous thing. What happens when you open your imagination to epiphanies is that you are invited to join in. You

yourself become part of the miraculous stories. So see now, there is the man at Capernaum, his eyes alive with gratitude because after half a lifetime as a cripple he now walks. See too if you can the way Our Lord looks back at him. See the triumphant smile of God who is kind. See the alabaster box open. And now it's Our Lord's turn to be grateful because she has given him her heart; and she will give him her heart again not many days hence when she takes him down from the Cross.

These stories – if you enter into them – will change your life forever. Imagine: in them you are being invited yourself to become part of the eternal gospel. So today's gospel, the wedding at Cana. One huge divine joke.

So at Cana, the happy couple are not mentioned. Nothing about her dress or the cake. There is no marriage service. There are no words from Our Lord about the sanctity of marriage. There is nothing to tell except that Jesus and five of his first disciples joined Mary, the mother of Jesus at the wedding and proceeded to drink their hosts dry. The miracle itself raises problems and I don't just mean the creation of 180 gallons of wine - more than even we get through at the back of the church after the service. The miracle – which you might have thought would be intended as a big advertisement for Jesus at the start of his ministry goes all unnoticed: no one knew about the water made wine – not even the host and certainly not the guests – only the servants who did the fetching and carrying.

This is marvellous. It offers insight into an aspect of the character of Our Lord as trickster or joker. Perhaps we find the idea offensive, irreverent? We ought not to. The Gospels are stuffed full of his paradoxical utterances, his jokes and his riddles. Remember when he was asked whether people should pay Caesar's poll tax. He said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's". That told them nothing about which was which. Or the Lord's Prayer itself: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us". But we don't, do we? And Jesus knew we don't. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". Like heck they will!

Back to Cana of Galilee and the biggest paradox of all. Jesus says to his mother - and the word should be translated "princess" – "Princess, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come". That princess in her blue dress. See her startled expression as her Son speaks to her like this. For the hour he is referring to is the hour of his sacrifice, his death by crucifixion. Already, at the very start of his ministry, his Cross is being built by the lakeside. You can see an image of it in the crossed masts of the little boats on the lake. They move across the lake silently. And Christ moves silently to his destiny which is to be crucified outside the City wall. Here are deep paradoxes and you need imagination to understand them. To be crucified was to be held accursed. Here is the Blessed One accursed. Here is the death by which we live. There is the Cross, the instrument of torture by which we are promised eternal bliss. Amen.