

Lord I pray thee. Open our eyes that we may see...



Remember when it used to be...Christmas? It feels like a lifetime ago doesn't it? It always amazes me how quickly, once the decorations are tucked away in the attic, Christmas as a whole becomes like a half-remembered dream. By the time it gets to a couple of weeks into January it's like trying to recall how you felt in the fuzzy hours before dawn, while you're dunking your biscuit in your tea at coffee break - as if that was another person you heard about in a story...

And if you encounter the *trappings* of Christmas - the sparkly star you forgot to put in the box, that's now sat forlornly in some dusty corner waiting for the next time you go up into the loft; or the lights the Council hasn't got round to taking down; or one of those vanishingly rare churches where the old tradition of keeping the tree up until Candlemas is still practiced - it feels...bizarre - uncanny - perhaps just plain wrong. Like stumbling across your woolly hat and mittens, when you're packing for your summer holiday.

In one sense this is, of course, a product of our culture - which is always focussed on the next thing, always charging forward, equally driven by its allergic reaction to waiting or silence, as it is by the related commercial necessity of clearing old stock, to make way for Valentines Cards and Easter Eggs and suntan lotion...

But the tendency to draw a veil across Christmas is more than just cultural or commercial - it's inherently *characteristic* of the incarnation. Truth be told, I suspect that Christmas has *always* had a bit of a tendency to suddenly disappear from view.

In part this is a result of the telescoping in the Christian Calendar of the 30-or-so years between Christ's Incarnation and His Baptism, to reflect the focus of the Gospels, to accommodate the intense reflection on his Passion & Death, Resurrection and Ascension, and to leave space for the Ages of Ages of Trinity season. All this concertina-ing of time, means the Magi's visit to the Holy House and the Shepherds arrival at the Manger crowd into the same frame, and you only need to blink twice and Christ has been presented at temple, stood there again as a precocious 12 year old, and is on his way back to cleanse and reconstitute it, with manger and Magi feeling, well, like a lifetime ago...

But there is another more *fundamental* reason for the vanishing of Christmas - and for the dangerous opportunity, for our growth "into the mysterious fruition of the Godhead", that results from it being out of sight. Namely, that the event of the incarnation is a sudden brilliant illumination of something hidden from ages and from generations, which is revealed in the person of Jesus, but revealed as a mystery: it is revealed and then hidden again, like the treasure in Jesus' parable of the field; it is revealed with a sky-splitting flash and fanfare, in a form which shows us the invisible, allows the unknowable to be known, but a form which, precisely in *order* to do so, *veils* the Divine Light, and wraps the gift of Christmas in layers that identify it as gift, even as they invite us into the unfolding of what it conceals.

What we celebrate in Epiphany, as at the Nativity and Candlemas is the recognition of the Light of the World, but it can't have escaped our notice that these bright moments of recognition are surrounded by uncomprehending darkness, by a continual failure to recognise.

So what we *pray* for in Epiphany is what Elisha prays for his servant - what Epiphany is - the ability to see. The starburst that lights up the dark landscape and reveals what is in front of our once blind eyes. The light that draws us to its radiant source.

And this is why, I would like to make a case for *deliberately* keeping the star as the last of the Christmas symbols to be packed away. Because it is hard to imagine a better emblem of what epiphany is; of why and in what sense the mystery revealed in Jesus is hidden again; of just what the process is that can see, if we will receive it, the light of Christmas steadily brightening in us, until we can sing with the Exultet in the darkness of the Easter Vigil: "May the Morning Star which never sets find this flame still burning: Christ, the Morning Star, who came back from the dead, and shed His peaceful light on all mankind."

Perhaps in a culture that marks important things and loaded terms with asterisks, we're not surprised to find a star hovering over the crucial Word in the Gospel texts, but plenty of people have wondered, across the generations, what it was exactly that the Magi saw, which gave rise to this particular icon as the leading light in the story of the incarnation.

It is equally conceivable that it was, as some suggest, a comet, or a new alignment of the astral spheres, or a nova, or a supernova, that heralded the intrusion of a new creature into the circle of animals, and gave us a new sign in our almanacs.

And none of those theories are without their symbolic appeal:

A comet would mean a remnant of the formation of the planets returning to illuminate the birth of the new creation. Whilst the most likely planetary conjunction to have caught the eye in those years was the triple intertwining of Jupiter and Saturn. Jupiter - Melchizedek's King of Joy and Sacrifice, and Saturn - the sorrows of Chronos' scythe and hourglass. And the weaving together of both to announce a new King. These are hardly inappropriate themes for the events of The Holy Night.

Nor the explosive fusion of two spheres in a Nova, that appears briefly to the human eye as a new star; nor the temporary brilliance of the supernova that marks the death of an old world and the seeding of the cosmos with the elements of new life... there is little to argue with any of this typology for the recreating union of the Spirit and dust in the Incarnation.

But the *point* of a star is that it has more than one point, and the core message of Epiphany is that what dawns on us in the Nativity, is a radiant truth that will expand to fill every dark corner of our realm, and that will transfigure every face and aspect of our thinking which we dare turn to towards it. The point of the five fingers of the star of Bethlehem is that we let them take us by the hand and lead us, like the Magi, into all truth, into encounter with the Mystery of Christ -which even Mary, who had carried him in person in her womb knew she must enter into, must ponder in her heart, must finally be lifted up into the heart of...

The Star is the sign of Epiphany - of a new light to see by, a new system to navigate by, of a new way to reorient our lives, and of the call to keep the Incarnation in view. This is what Dr PUSEY was earnestly contending for, a deepening vision of ourselves, of the nations, of time and circumstance *in the light* of the incarnation, a deepening penetration *into* the light of that invisible reality it opens to us - a deepening recognition that what was hidden in God and is revealed in Christ is a mystery. Not a thing to pocket, but boundless depths to plunge into, in the finite space of human life.

So what our lessons lay out for us today is this process of coming to see ever more fully, and its consequences in our chosen behaviour.

Behaviour that at first glance might seem completely confounding. Who in their right mind sits calmly eating their Weetabix while a thousand armed men gather outside to devour them? And who in their right mind, having triumphed against all the odds and found their mortal enemies at their mercy, makes them dinner...and sends them home? We read it *in the light* of our Christian faith, and it seems obvious - that's what Christ calls us to do - not fear the one who can destroy the body, love your enemies. This is what the Epistle demands of us. Refuse vengeance. Feed your foes. But it is not obvious, and if you have ever felt the thumping panic of the presence of even one person intent on harming you, or if your fingers have ever closed around the possibility of ending a threat to your life once and for all, you would know. It is not obvious. It is madness.

Unless...you can see something we don't see with our ordinary eyes.

Elisha's actions are the product of his Epiphany. Paul's behaviour is the product of his vision¹. And it is no different for us.

We have to learn to see the significance of God's Son taking the very nature of a servant before we will pour out our lives in service of neighbours. We have to learn to see the real power of the Resurrection before we will dare to love our adversaries let alone our mortal enemies.

We have to learn to see the Godhead veiled in flesh, and discern the real presence of Christ in body and blood, if we are to glimpse the presence of Jesus in a stranger or persecutor or visit him in prison or clothe him when he is naked.

We have to learn to see his eternal perspective and recognise him as the trustworthy judge of all the living and dead if we are - impossible task - to suspend judgment...

In fact if we are to do Romans 12 - to 'therefore offer our bodies together as one living sacrifice' in all the ways those verses lays out - we have to learn to see the Righteousness from God that is revealed in Romans 1-11, in everything that comes *before* the "therefore".

That is what we are *here* for!

¹ See this week's Feast of the Conversion of St Paul

Well, I can't speak for you. It is what I am here for. Sir, I want to see Jesus. I want to learn to see by the light of the world. I want my blind eyes to be more fully opened because at the moment all I can see is trees waking about. I want to know Christ and him crucified and the power of his resurrection². I don't just want to know there is a mystery and it is revealed in Jesus, I want to sound the mystery, I want to be led into bleeding heart of it, and from that impossibly dense core of love I want new life to explode within me, and all of the people who are part of me - which is not less than all of the people. I want to be part of the remaking of the whole of creation. That is why I am here. Aren't you?

Now I know what you're thinking. Or at least what I was thinking, even as I was saying that 'we have to learn to see the significance of God's Son taking the very nature of a servant, before we will pour out our lives in service of neighbours'.

I was thinking: 'Hold on - isn't that *how* we come to see? By serving? Isn't that how we come to comprehend Romans 1-11? By offering our bodies as a living sacrifice?' And of course it is.

I'm not suggesting we should wait to see it all before we act on any of it. I'm saying we mustn't kid ourselves that there's nothing more to see. We mustn't stop crying out for more vision, for ears to hear, we mustn't stop listening and looking, because one of the primary ways that serving leads to seeing, as well as stemming from it, is that serving reveals our inability to serve; choosing to love reveals our aching incapacity to love as we should; pouring ourselves out reveals our emptiness, and cause us to seek more fervently the source...

In the end, the thing that the Centurion demonstrates - which Jesus calls faith - is just this. It is vision that in looking can grasp what is *really* present in what it sees, by following the lines of perspective to their vanishing point, and perceiving what normally lies beyond sight - the source of what is seen. The source from which its being comes. The Greek word for authority - *exousia* - means nothing less than that. Not just a chain of command, but a chain of *being*.

And Epiphany is so difficult to articulate because it involves this *kind of impossible glimpse* - of something that is both *meant* to be known, *and not (really)* meant to be seen. And how do you even talk about that?

The closest approximation we have is probably our language of heart. We say 'heart' to mean that which gives life to the whole of a person, and that which is the deepest truth of that persons identity. But their heart is something we are not really meant to see - something which it would horrify us to see physically - because seeing it normally means their life is extinguished or at risk, yet it *is* that which we want to 'touch', and know, and even enter in the invisible, avowedly spiritual, but still actually physical, process of loving that person...

'Heart' works in our speech in this way because it holds in one word the core and whole, the physical body and the total person. And Epiphany is seeing the heart. Not just of one person, but of personhood, of humanity, of the cosmos entire, just for a moment, before it is veiled again in the flesh it animates. The same flesh which draws us to enter that heart in love...

² See this week's Feast of the Conversion of St Paul Office Readings: Philippians 3

We enact a moment of this Epiphany in the liturgy of every mass, and appropriately we mark it by seeing and speaking from the perspective of the Centurion.

To our normal vision, the priest is human focal point of everything that unfolds in a space like this. But that, of course, is horribly short-sighted - the human centre and pinnacle of this rite, and all it radiates, the animating heart of everything that is happening here, the focus of our journey of love, is God in the person of the man Christ Jesus. But, for almost all of the mass the reality of his presence is hidden from view, not least by the body of the one whose being as priest he originates. But just for an instant the heart itself is exposed to view, the priest steps out of the way - behind the presence of that which is meant to be known and entered, but not usually seen - and we hear the words "Behold the Lamb", as we instinctively, glimpsing, look away, and say "Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof, but only say the word"...

This is Epiphany - this is the core of our being trained to perceive the mystery that is revealed in the Incarnation - to follow the lines of perspective to the vanishing point to see, better to discern, the source of the new creation, and its infinite focus; to access that source of our righteousness and resurrection and peace and justice which is the only way we can live, with authority, our lives as a living sacrifice - so that we might be those who receive the light of the world, so that we might "shine like stars in a crooked and perverse generation".

Lord we pray thee. Open our eyes that we may see...