

Sermon for Epiphany  
Sunday 7th January 2017  
Isaiah 60.1-6, Matthew 2.1-12  
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“...And they left for their own country by another road...” And that’s it. We never hear of the Magi again. Similarly the shepherds. Here, we are presented with the Magi, the three wise men who visit Jesus in the manger, and bear the famous gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - the moment we recall today, on this Feast of the Epiphany. And again, like the shepherds, and like many of those who first met Jesus in His infancy, we meet these characters, we get to learn a lot about them, and we feel very close to them and close to God through the faithful example they give us.. But then they disappear.

There are, of course, hagiographical and apocryphal accounts for what happened to these people, but there is nothing particularly certain or firmly verified. All we are left with are stories, presumptions, ideas, legends; as the key narrative in The Bible seemingly leaves us with very little to go on afterwards.

I don’t know about you, but Christmas feels like a long time ago. A week’s vacation, New Year, then a week back at work, and already it feels as though the event was long ago. And what’s funny and, I think, interesting, is that it equally feels like it was just yesterday. It is the most unusual sensation, which I feel every year around this time, where I feel as though it was only yesterday when Christmas itself happened, and yet it feels so far away. And what’s more, I then start feeling as though last Christmas was only yesterday.

Epiphany is a strange time of year. Something big has happened, and now we wonder what happens next. Something huge has happened which feels so close, yet seems so far off. We have journeyed in the footsteps of those who went there first, and yet we wonder if we really knew them, or, if we did, then will we ever know them again.

This distance, or this sense of a distance, is something which is explored throughout the Biblical narrative. From Abraham, who journeys, wonders, and counts the stars. To Moses, who, after everything he has been through, watches the promised land from a distance as he dies. Or the prophets - so close, knowing and disclosing the anticipatory message of divine encounter so intimately and with such certainty, yet they will never see Him face to face in this life. Or John the Baptist - preparing the way, but accepting that he was not the way. Even Jesus, on the Cross, in his final moments cries out to God why he has been forsaken, seemingly abandoned, alone, and yet He is God, the very embodiment of all that is and ever will be - and yet He cries.

When we encounter the Magi, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna in a few weeks’ time, the Holy Family themselves, all those who saw Him first; when we witness how they encountered Him, and how they then journeyed on into forever, we are reminded potently of that same closeness and distance that we, too, experience with God. I certainly feel that way at this time of year. I wonder if you ever feel that distance yourself? It’s like living in London - so many people living so close to one another, and yet we hardly know each other. So much diversity, hope, potential and opportunity, and yet it is easy to feel alone, lost, confused, dumbfounded. It’s even easy to feel anger or resentment. I wonder if or when that has been your experience?

But it is when we can accept and embrace what is not as much as what is, then we find a way to work through that distance. When we ask - What do we do with this? Where do we begin? How can we actually engage with God in our lives, and seek a life transformed by Him? Without trying to sum up two thousand years of Christianity on one Sunday, a possible beginning is to accept the distance; accepting what we don't know, what we can't say, what we can't fully comprehend - because, believe it or not, that is how we might just come closer to God.

In the fifth century, there lived a man known as Pseudo-Dionysius. He has recently come to prominence again as his writing has much to say about the currently popular topic of how we use language to define who God is. One of his famous teachings was called apophatic, or, eventually, negative theology; from the Ancient Greek ἀπόφασις via ἀπόφημι apophēmi, meaning "to deny." A way of talking about God, which says since God is so beyond our understanding, it's therefore hard to say who or what God exactly is, therefore we can only really speak about what God is not - God is not this or that. This way of thinking is contrasted to cataphatic theology, from the Greek kataphasis meaning "affirmation," a method of saying who God is, in positive terms, actually stating what God is, God is love, beauty, wonder - rather than saying what God, negatively, is not.

Of course, these two ways of speaking about God are not that simple. As I'm sure we all feel, it isn't really enough to speak about what God is not, or simply to say who or what God is. God goes beyond positive and negative terms, and such a way of speaking about God certainly doesn't do much for us or God when we contemplate the distance we experience. But that is why Pseudo-Dionysius is so important, because he never actually stated a clear-cut distinction, only later theologians did that. What the great fifth century thinker actually taught might be summed up in his famous phrase, where God or our encounter with God is a "dazzling darkness." To encounter God is to encounter a dazzling darkness.

In other words, God is not just described in negative or positive terms. Rather, it is by acknowledging that none of our language can describe God; that our own means of comprehension fail us at the dazzling brilliance yet mystery of God; and by allowing ourselves to be dazzled, dazed, accepting that we don't know, then our hearts and minds can be open to a truth which is real, rather than something we construct or manipulate ourselves, as we would like it to be.

Instead of trying to talk about God, we need to stop and, instead, allow ourselves to encounter God. Not simply looking for Him, but letting Him come to us. That is what Christmas teaches us. That is what the Epiphany was. It wasn't simply people visiting God. It was people who were faithful and open to change, not forcing but letting God's story unfold in their lives in a new way. Letting God guide them, by a star, by a child, by a path as yet untrodden, and uncertain, yet fully trusting God to show them the way - even when the next step was unknown. A dazzling darkness.

As Isaiah says, "Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice..." That is an Epiphany - gazing at the dazzling darkness, as fellow pilgrims, and instead of changing what you think God is, being prepared to change how you think, then God will show you everything you'll ever need to know.