

Ongoing epiphanies of grace and truth

Terry Bloor's Sermon for 7 February 2021

John 1:1-14

Second Sunday before Lent

The other day, someone, with a discernible note of resignation in their voice, said to me, "Oh well, at Candlemas we come to the end of the Epiphany season." I agreed but felt the need to add, "yes, but thankfully not the end of the season of epiphanies!" Epiphanies of our Lord are, I would suggest, a continual necessity within the Christian life. They help keep us faithful, they fuel hope, and they help keep us going through difficulties which are many and varied.

There are numerous religious orders within today's church founded by those who received their own, sometimes dramatic, epiphanies. We read of such people in books of church history and hagiographies; many Christians around the world still benefit greatly from the spiritual traditions these recipients of epiphanies founded - Franciscan, Dominican, Benedictine, Ignatian, and so on. Often based on a particular understanding of God, or one of his attributes, through direct revelation or mystical contemplation, frameworks for sustaining Christian, spiritual life have developed.

On 8th May 1373, Julian of Norwich experienced fifteen visions (epiphanies, you could say) in which God's love for humanity was made clear through the person of Jesus. From the visions she writes, "And in this vision he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind's eye and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came in a general way, like this: It is all that is made." Julian's interpretation of this experience was that whatever God loves he holds in the palm of his hand: he holds it safely; he holds it securely. From her own perspective and dire, personal circumstances, the visions spoke of a future wellbeing, a situation of Shalom. The revelations gave rise in her heart to a sentiment lifted and used by T.S. Eliot in the last of his Four Quartets: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well". Against the backdrop of our own present circumstances, I cannot think of any more hopeful a note to ponder.

Having been prompted to think about such matters, maybe you have had a moment of insight, an epiphany rather like Julian? Following a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that I led a couple of years ago, many of the pilgrims have shared special moments of insight, some remarkable sense of our Lord's presence, a spiritual connection which is no less vibrant today despite the passage of time. Of course, you do not need to be in such notable, holy places to receive in this way from God. Within our own localities and throughout the year, what about those winter afternoons when the sky is flooded with the fiery red of the setting

sun? What about that bright spring morning when birds are singing? There can be autumn mornings when the sunlight sparkles on a carpet of dew over the fields as if someone has scattered diamonds. Have you not perceived the face of a child light up as its mum or dad approaches? These can be moments when God invites us to delight in his creation, all that is made, to enjoy with him the world and the people who surround us. These are moments when a kind of innocence and joy that were surely present at the beginning of creation are restored; they now offer us glimpses of God in a new and dynamic way.

Reflecting on the recorded, spiritual experiences of others can challenge us to ask ourselves whether we have lost some sensitivity to the things of God and are less able to see that he delights and rejoices over us, the human race - his prize creation. Then again, maybe we think that such a sensitivity to these experiences are only for others, those in some way special and somehow privileged? Would we fear ridicule if we were to speak or write of our own spiritual experiences; might we be deemed 'over-spiritual' or somewhat 'OTT'? If either proved to be the case, we would at least find ourselves in good company. Living almost two centuries before Julian, the German visionary and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, was not taken at all seriously before she received an affirming visit by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Having listened carefully and prayerfully to Hildegard's compositions, St. Bernard drew the conclusion that others could not understand or accept Hildegard's visions simply because they had not shared them. Furthermore, until they sought God as fervently as Hildegard, they would remain in ignorance and without her depth of spiritual knowledge and insight. What a sadness it would be to miss out on the knowledge of God whose knowledge and love for us caused him to come and live among us, to restore us and to heal us.

Today's, well-known Gospel text, is that which I look forward to hearing at the annual service of Nine Lessons and Carols and again, often at midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Against the cosmic backdrop that St. John paints for us, the passage culminates in the tremendous affirmation that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; the incarnate God – Emmanuel. John can make this statement with boldness because of a series of cumulative epiphanies he had received. John is describing a moment which makes for the possibility of change, it is a moment that brings hope, it is a moment in time which redefines what it means to be human, it is a moment that makes a way for reconciliation, for re-creation and newness.

Picking up on my earlier statement: the implications of what St. John proclaims are by no means limited to our Christmas and Epiphany seasonal celebrations. They speak of the very nature of love, and therefore, the nature of God. The Father's desire is to enjoy fellowship with us, his desire is of the very best for us. That is why God came to live among us; he wanted, and continually wants to draw us to himself through his Son. St. John would have us know with all certainty that in the man Jesus, we see enfleshed, the fulness of God. In Jesus we see demonstrated God's concern for people's lives and welfare, a God who wants to bring healing and forgiveness. Our God is always ready to offer a new start and there are always new possibilities opening before us. If God delights in

us so much, then surely it matters to him how we respond to his initiative of love. Recognising his love must be the first step. In his book 'Mystery of the Incarnation', Cardinal Basil Hume states that we need to remember the simple truth that God is *in love* with each of us. (Now, there is a rather nice Valentine's statement we could all think about next Sunday, 14th February.) It is an amazing thought that each of us can say, "God is *in love* with me" - "God delights *in me*". This simple yet profound truth, if watered and nurtured, can be a seed of faith which grows and begins to change who we are and how we live in no lesser way than the Julians and Hildegards of this world. This is the response and outcome our Lord desires.

Of course, this type of change is not something which generally happens overnight. Even with the best of intentions, we will probably spend our whole life receiving invitations from God and missing most of them because we cannot or will not watch and listen. Maybe we will recognise an invitation but be too afraid to say "yes". It is not by chance that our lectionary readings, now running up to Lent, will cause us to think about the implications of godly changes to our lives, necessary changes that we might draw closer to God. Let us open our eyes and our hearts. Today, St. John reminds us that it is God's presence in human form that allows us to receive and understand his love for us, his willingness and desire to be with us and share life with us. This is the kind of love which allows us to change, albeit ever so slowly. Yes, he comes to us as one of us; and to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become his children - born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of himself. May it be so for each of us. Amen.

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