



Feast of the Epiphany

6th January 2013

*Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72: 1-17. 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12,
Matthew 2:1-12*

Isaiah proclaims our post-Christmas reality, he gives voice to the gift we have all received:

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”

It is not an alarm, nor is it a wake-up call; rather it is sheer delight at the dawning of a new day. It is the “Arise” that brings emptiness to the Easter Tomb and fullness to the manger’s Womb. And what a gift it is that Isaiah proclaims: *“A multitude of camels shall cover you”* [v6]

Being covered by a multitude of camels, strangely enough, was not on my Christmas list. However, in Isaiah’s day, I guess for those who heard his prophetic delight, the idea of a multitude of camels would have added to the sense of abundance and the value of the gift that Isaiah proclaimed. And that serves as a reminder that we must be aware of the context of the scriptures as we read them. The wisdom and the insights of Scripture are often revealed in the essence of the narrative rather than in the actuality of the story, the obvious surface reading.

When we read the ‘letters of Paul’ we often read them in the context of Paul as the proto-evangelist, the one who is the creator of Christendom, seeking to convert the gentiles to the authority of the Church. However once again, the church of Paul’s time is as far removed, and different, from the church of today as a multitude of camels is from whatever tops your wish list of blessings. The essence of Paul, and of the writings attributed to Paul, is again much richer than the surface reading.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.” Paul lives and speaks in the light of Isaiah’s new dawn. *“...a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles”* - Paul is captivated by all that is revealed in what he fully acknowledges as *“the mystery of Christ”*. If Isaiah proclaims the ‘process of Christmas’ that we have just celebrated, then Paul, with the same energy of delight, proclaims the process of living in the light of the Christmas gift. Paul speaks of a movement, a change in worldview from that which was held as tradition and orthodoxy, the understanding of “former generations” toward that which is made manifest in the light of new revelation. It is a movement beyond the confines of those who hold on to the faith, toward that which embraces all, a reaching out to the gentiles. Paul is captivated by the light of Christmas and so knows himself as a “sharer” in the promise, and he knows that this same promise, the same light is a gift that is revealed and shared for all.

A surface reading of Paul paints a picture of someone preaching the gospel and converting gentiles into followers of Jesus. The essence of Paul is perhaps more fully realised in verse 6; *“fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise...”* These are embracing statements that identify the light Paul has encountered, and illustrate the enlightenment of

Christmas is of a gift revealed for all, given to all and made real when one appreciates the common humanity that we all share in.

The gospel narrative for today is also about the revelation of Christmas, and so too the revelation to the whole of humanity. It reveals the gift of light and so reveals that which enlightens us and everyone. Again, it is a narrative of movement; wisdom moving beyond its place of knowing; *“wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.”*

Wisdom that is moved by a light from above; *“we observed his star at its rising..”*
“Arise, shine; for your light has come

And in the person of Herod we see that fear is also moved by the very same process. A fear that seeks to eliminate the light so that it can maintain the everyday order, fear that holds on to the status-quo. It is a fear of change, fear that the dawning of a new day may interrupt the traditions we rest upon. It is also a fear that surfaces in a temporal worldview, for the dawning of each new day brings death closer and if we cannot see beyond that obvious worldview then the fear is as real for us as it was for Herod. Perhaps also a fear that there is something more important than we are, a light so bright it will illuminate our shadow.

Wisdom moves into the light; and there true joy is revealed; *“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”* Wisdom opens its treasure chests and offers the richest of gifts; and wisdom returns home *“by another road.”*

The narrative speaks of the movement, and of the change that is occasioned by Christmas, and by all that Christmas reveals to us and for us. It leaves us with questions. Will we walk the same path now that Christmas is revealed, or will we now walk by another path? Where do we find ourselves in the place of Herod, seeking out that which the star reveals and yet with an intention of holding on to all that we have? Herod goes through the motions, in fact he seems to desire that which drives the three magi, and yet all the time he wants to keep all that he has. Does Herod represent the much of the church?

As we encounter the Epiphany, will we like wisdom's trinity offer that which we treasure, give freely of our riches and then seek another road, one that will take us forward, bring us home; a way forward in which we will no longer encounter the Herodian fears of our past.?

Epiphany, in our tradition marks the end of Christmas, and yet its essence is all about beginning.

I will end with a poem:

“The Wise Man's Journey”

There will be no camels;
we are going on horseback,
at least for some of the way.

And we won't arrive there
a few hours after everyone else.
It will be weeks, perhaps - or months.

We are not in a hurry.
That is not the way we work;
we are not Europeans.

We will discuss the phenomenon - the star -
and if it does not go away,
and if we still feel curious, we will travel.

We will look in the wrong place.
Yes, I admit that,
because wise men, potentates, intellectuals -
call us what you will - are not infallible.

We expect a new power
to emerge from the side of the old one.
We expect the destination we seek
to resemble what our common sense deduces.

We will be upset, angry even,
to find that Herod is ignorant
and that his residence is not the birthplace.

We will find it hard
and intellectually demeaning
to bow the knee to the son of refugees.

And all this....
all this upset will be compounded
when it comes to journeying back
and we discover
we have to go home by an alternate route.

That is the trouble with God.
He does not let you leave as you came.
He sends you back,
stripped of your presumptions,
making for home by an alternate route.

from *Cloth for the Cradle* - Iona Community Wild Goose Worship Group, 2000 pp. 125-126