

The Epiphany of our Lord

Matthew 2:1-12

What does Epiphany mean to you? Well to many people it is the day they welcome as a time for removing Christmas decorations from their homes. It marks the end of the Christmas season and after the frenzied hype it is a very welcome end. For others it marks a return to normal patterns of life. With Christmas and New Year celebrations over for another year Epiphany is when most people are already back to work and either a welcome or an unwelcome back to reality is felt.

The definition of an epiphany is a sudden realisation or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something. The term is used in either a philosophical or literal sense to signify that the claimant has "found the last piece of the puzzle and now sees the whole picture," or has new information or experience, often insignificant by itself, that illuminates a deeper frame of reference.

The Epiphany in a Christian sense is the name given to the revelation of Christ to the Magi, the wise men from the East who, alerted by changes in the stars, embarked on a journey west in search of a King. Just like Epiphany season often marks the end of Christmas in our day to day lives – it should also remain separate from Christmas theologically. Christmas cards often depict the baby Jesus visited by Shepherds and Magi simultaneously and indeed most nativity plays feature both visitors but in fact the account of the Magi exists only in Matthews gospel and the account of the visitation of the shepherds only in Luke's gospel so there is really no reason to bundle the two instances together except that they both occur during Jesus' early childhood. The visitation of the shepherds seems to have occurred shortly after Jesus' birth and the Magi are often depicted as arriving to worship Jesus as a toddler – indeed Herod ordered the death of all baby boys under the age of 2 so it seems reasonable that the Magi told him that by their calculations they were looking for a child under 2.

The coupling of the word epiphany to the visit of the Magi seems to be based on their origins in a different culture. The shepherds were Jewish – not necessarily the most religious Jews – but Jews nevertheless who would have been aware of the prophesies of a coming messiah. These Magi, on the other hand, have arrived completely without warning looking for a king of the Jews. One can only assume that they didn't arrive every time a new Jewish king was born or crowned otherwise someone would have mentioned this custom. No, they were looking for more than a King. They had seen something in the stars that sparked an epiphany in them.

Something so special that it moved them to obtain expensive gifts, undertake a long journey clearly knowing very little about where they were going and what they were going to find there because they went to the wrong place – they went to Jerusalem. Which is easy to understand if they were not aware of the scriptures and prophesy which pointed to Bethlehem of Judea; they made the reasonable leap of looking for a king in a palace in an important city.

Another common theme for the Epiphany is that of Jesus being illuminated to those beyond the Jewish nation, which the Magi seem to have been. It is the start of a young life which would go on constantly to surprise and shock those around him not least with his continual knack of including those ignored by the Jewish hierarchy as not being clean or holy enough or Jewish enough for God. In many ways Jesus' whole life was a series of Epiphanies for those who were around him and for all who heard his preaching and heard of his deeds.

That Jesus had come to earth for all people and not just as a Jewish messiah was a massive change in perspective for people looking for his coming. It would not have been something John the Baptist was expecting, there are stories of encounters with gentiles during Jesus' ministry that his disciples found uncomfortable and for those who went on to spread the Gospel in the early Church this was a difficult decision to make, to include the gentiles or not.

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians explains his own calling to preach to the Gentiles, amazing in that as a Pharisee he would have had minimal contact with gentiles until his conversion to Christianity. But over time St. Paul and St. Peter, and indeed the whole of the early church came to understand that this gift of Jesus was to the world and humanity as a whole and not to selected individuals or peoples. They had their various epiphanies during their own ministries but the universal access to God through Jesus was established from the very beginning.

Having an epiphany is not always a one time only event – we can have lots of little epiphanies which help us to understand things more and more which eventually, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle can be put together to form a complete picture. Just like putting on a bright light can sometimes mean that we still cannot see everything until our eyes have adjusted to the brightness – so there were many startling events in Jesus' life but sometimes the full relevance of them was only appreciated later with more information or after a period of time had elapsed allowing those around him to process all of the information they were receiving.

All in all Jesus' childhood, of which we know relatively little, was providing clues to the life he would lead as an adult. He was indeed revealed to gentiles when that star led the Magi to Bethlehem and during his preaching he would talk of his own people rejecting him, and God being revealed to the nations.

It is for us as Christians to look at these instances in Jesus' childhood not as charming stories of a little boy put into scripture to give some context to Jesus' life for our own interest, but rather as important events offering evidence to help us achieve our own epiphany of faith. Showing us exactly the sort of messiah he was, born divine, revealed from the very beginning to Jews and Gentiles alike and recognised by representatives of both. This is evidence for us to use in our mission through life to live the gospel. As Jesus revealed himself in a variety of different ways to a variety of different people, it is now left to us to do the same in our place and time.