

The Epiphany of Our Lord: Looking Up and Down and Around

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

What is 'epiphany'? It's when something that's been obscured or unknown bursts into the open; it is no longer hidden but *manifest*. 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.' This is a glorious surprise – a flash of lightning, an 'ah-ha moment' that enlivens an individual or a community.

Now you can't procure this by a scientific investigation or a political project. Epiphanies can't be engineered. *But can they be prepared for?* Could we find a discipline or a way of life that might at least open us up to the possibility of such manifestations of hidden truth and beauty?

Think of those astronomers from the east who travelled to Bethlehem. They were men who habitually *looked up*; they trained their eyes on the sky. What for? Not to conquer the heavens or to travel there, like those fatuous billionaires today. No, they raised their eyes and studied the stars in search of signs and meanings. And, like travellers and sailors over the millennia, they observed the sky to find their way on the face of the earth. Above all, they looked up in search of wisdom and understanding.

But is there a danger in constantly looking up? Pious or scholarly people are sometimes mocked for being so heavenly that they're no earthly use. If I walk along Long Street with my head in the air I could trip up or even be run over. And I would almost certainly miss what's on the ground. For if there's glory in the sky, there's glory too at our feet. Glory in the intricate world of plants and soil and streams and insects. To be open to epiphany, don't we need to *look down* as well as look up?

If you go to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square you can see a rather eccentric painting of the three wise men. It's by the Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel; and although it shows three astronomers there's no sky or stars in the picture. No, it's set in a rather ramshackle barn, and the men are not looking up but *looking down*, stooping or kneeling awkwardly in their opulent clothes as they present their absurd gifts. For the revelation, the glory, the epiphany, is low down: a rather shy-looking baby on his mother's knees. Here, on the ground, is the one who will open eyes, here is the divine Presence.

But in the picture there are at least a dozen other people, jostling each other. A rather odd-looking group, who don't seem to be particularly interested in either the baby or the wise men – including Joseph, who's leaning over to the man next to him as though they're sharing racing tips. These people are neither looking up nor looking down but *looking around*.

And perhaps they're inviting us viewers to look around as well. For may not epiphanies burst out in the world about us – in our loves and joys and labours, in human art and achievement, in the common life of the Church? Nowhere are there barriers to the glory of God except in our own lazy eyes and ears:

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air –

That we ask of the starts in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars! -
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places; -
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

(from Francis Thompson's 'The Kingdom of God', c. 1907)

No, we can't engineer epiphanies. But in this new year, might our eyes and our ears be sufficiently alert, sufficiently mobile, to glimpse that many-splendoured thing, the glory above and beneath and around us, driven by the great centrifugal force of Jesus from the barn at Bethlehem to the baptism at the Jordan, to the wedding at Cana, to the death and the unsealed tomb and the gift of the Spirit and on to ever new epiphanies?

Might we learn to look up, in yearning and imagining; to look down, in wonder and recognition; to look around, in love and communion?

Or, to put it another way, up to the Father of Lights; down to the Son who came down from heaven; around to the Spirit shed abroad in our world – praising the glorious and universal Trinity, as we stand to confess our faith ...

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