

Address by David James for the Sunday of the Epiphany, 2 January 2022

‘Lift up your eyes and look around’, Isaiah tells us this morning, because ‘the glory of the Lord has risen upon you’.

Epiphanies, those disclosures of truth or of sudden understanding are all around us. These are the times when our experience leads us into a deeper understanding of ourselves or of the world around us. These are the ‘eureka’ moments of life when something has been discovered and you know that something important has been glimpsed, when you are moved to tears by joy, when you are conscious of the warmth of love, when the presence of something other - we would say of God - is maybe felt more than understood, sensed perhaps but not comprehended.

So lately I’ve been looking around and noticing what I take to be epiphanies. Here are some of them.

Alok Sharma was the minister given the task of chairing the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow in November. His epiphany came on a long-haul flight to one of his preparation meetings when he was flicking through the in-flight films. He came across one by Al Gore, the American politician, called *An Inconvenient Truth*. Although he doesn’t normally get through an in-flight film he watched this one twice. It’s about the impact of climate change. Sharma said, ‘It really was a light-bulb moment, I thought, “What is the impact of this on my kids - on other people’s kids?”’ When, after long hours of detailed negotiation an agreement was finally hammered out in Glasgow, he wept openly. Something had changed for him, deeply.

Then there was the epiphany in the cathedral. The dean, writing in the weekly sheet described it like this.

‘I sat down recently next to a man who was crying. “I’m not a Christian”, he said, “but there’s something about this place that has really got to me.” Frequently people are ambushed by the atmosphere. People come through the door seeking to admire the art and the heritage but they are touched by something greater than they can possibly imagine.’

Then there was Trudy Makepeace, a drug addict who is now an ordained minister in Bristol. Her epiphany happened like this.

‘A month before my final arrest I became open to the possibility of living hope in Jesus Christ; I prayed to receive God’s forgiveness and asked for his help.

As I did I experienced something I’d never known before: overwhelming love and acceptance, a sense of coming home. I felt peaceful and clean for the first time, instead of restlessness and anxiety. I was in complete disbelief; the guilt, regret and shame had vanished. I experienced freedom from the controlling power of drugs, lying, stealing and manipulation; it was miraculous.’ *Abused, Addicted, Free* - her autobiography.

Matthew gives us the story of the wise men coming to look for Jesus. They, like most people in the ancient world, believed everything to be of a piece so that for them the earth and the heavens were intimately linked to each other. We’re not so aware of the night sky these days with bright street lighting even in the countryside. But when you do visit a place which is truly dark at night you can’t but be aware of the stars and the vastness of space beyond our little world. It gives a different and wider perspective on our lives, such that we might well say with the psalmist, ‘What are mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you take notice of them?’

So the conviction that those wise men had that there were heavenly signs of something important happening was not strange to those who first heard the story when Matthew wrote it. But his readers, probably Jews, might have been surprised that this early revelation about Jesus’ identity was first made to the gentile world. The magi were the first beyond Jesus’ own family and people to have any inkling of who he was and would become: the king of the Jews. In this gospel it is also an outsider who first acclaims Jesus as God’s Son when the centurion who watches him die on the cross suddenly has an epiphany that in this crucified outlaw he is also looking on God: ‘Truly this was God’s own Son.’ The notice above Jesus’ head, that here was the king of the Jews, was meant ironically. The centurion suddenly realised it was simply the truth.

That’s the kind of human experience this great festival opens our hearts and minds to: the truth about God, about ourselves and about the world we live in.

We’re still searching the heavens for meaning. On Christmas Day itself NASA in the US, in collaboration with space agencies in Canada and Europe, launched the James Webb Space Telescope, a new, more sophisticated version of the Hubble Telescope whose journey will take it even further than the magi’s, some million miles into

outer space. Its purpose? To explore the origins of galaxies, of life, even of the universe itself.

Indeed you might say that science is based on the premise that if you look carefully enough and long enough at the material universe around you it will reveal its inner secrets and deeper working - from outer space to viruses.

Our Christian faith speaks rather of an inner journey, which may take just as long and be quite as arduous, but is no less real and is also ultimately a search for meaning. As both St Luke and St Paul say, you don't have to go far, but you do need to go deep. The kingdom of God is within you.

It's also in the encounter with others in the world around us. At the end of his rule for Christian communities St Benedict stops at the door of the monastery, as it were, and speaks about the person who is responsible for greeting those who present themselves there. It's an important task because each arrival is both potentially an opportunity and a revelation because it is always an encounter with the other. Benedict is especially concerned about the welcome offered the poor because, he says, 'in them especially Christ is to be seen'.

Christ in the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the hungry. That's Matthew too: his parable of the sheep and the goats and the Lord who says, 'Whatever you did for the least of these you did for me too.' (Mt 25.40)

So that's the simple message I have for you at this Epiphany: lift up your eyes and look around. Expect epiphanies, they're not so rare as you might think. And then once seen, like the magi, you may find you take a different road, 'no longer at ease in [your] old dispensations' (Eliot *The Journey of the Magi*)