

Epiphanies – Rev'd Catherine Eaton – Sunday 3rd January 2010

Readings: Is 60.1-6, Ps 72. 1-7,10-14, Eph 3.1-12, Mt.2.1-12

It's good to be back amongst you, but sad to be saying farewell to Hans. But before I speak about Hans, I should say something about Jesus. Epiphany is his day after all!

But before that, I'd like to tell you a story which was something of an epiphany for me. Maybe some of you have heard it. This is a very simplified version but you'll get the point.

Some years ago a Japanese scientist began to study the properties of water. He discovered that when water is frozen, it forms crystals which change depending on the environment and circumstances. When he spoke lovingly to the water, and then froze it, the snowflake-shaped crystals were perfectly and beautifully formed. When he spoke with anger or negativity, the frozen crystals were ill-formed or fractured altogether.

For me, this is not just an interesting fact, but speaks to us of God's wisdom hidden in all creation and God's invitation to us to co-operate with him in the re-making of his world. Our words of love can actually change the quality of creation – how amazing is that! Our love continues to make real God's life-changing Word of Love spoken to us in Christ.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, when magi traversed the desert to find the one born to be a light to the nations. Beneath a star they would discover God's saving presence made manifest to the world in a tiny child.

The Magi had an interesting journey – a big new star, a trip in the desert, a bit of an adventure with a nasty king, and a visit to a royal baby. But only as they encountered the child himself, did their hearts awaken to the mystery before them.

Epiphanies come to us when some external trigger awakens something inside us, reveals a hidden truth, and changes the way we view the world.

In that child, God spoke once and for all his Word of Love to all creation.

But the Epiphany story didn't stop with the Magi – it was merely the beginning. That Word of Love continues to ripple out through the ages. It still echoes within and amongst us if we listen. It speaks still of God's desire to remake the world through love, God's desire to be known and seen and heard.

That one moment when God's presence was revealed to the Magi continues to unfold before us, through the child that grew and became the man Jesus, through his teaching and healing and suffering, through his rising to new life, and now still in the ministry of love entrusted to us through his Spirit, and in the epiphanies of creation itself.

Epiphany is a daily possibility – things are happening all the time, God is speaking all the time, but more often than not we are closed, resistant to God's surprising presence. Our hearts, our minds, our eyes and ears are closed. We look at the surface of things and think - that's interesting. But we are not awakened by it.

Our hearts are forever closing to God and to the gentle beckonings of Love. We remain detached, untouched. Nothing gets below our thick self-protective skins.

Like when we're back in old familiar places - we bring all our assumptions – ho hum, Epiphany again - another star in the sky, another journey in the desert, another baby in a manger.

We need to be woken up to God's presence again and again. God keeps reaching out to us to touch us, to speak words of love to us, to surprise us and reveal himself to us. God is everywhere at work, calling for our attention, trying to awaken our ever-aching hearts to his life-changing word of love for us.

We are called to share in that ongoing work of Epiphany, in the revealing of God to the nations – through the ministry of love entrusted to us, that work of love which alone will wake the wounded and closed heart. If a word of love from a scientist can make a water crystal perfect, how much more can we begin to see what our words of love can do in the lives of those around us, and in the world which we inhabit?

As Christ's body, we are the bearers now of his word of love for all people. We participate with Christ in the re-making of God's creation through our love. God has actually made the world responsive to love. We know it through our own experience – though it sounds clichéd - love actually changes things.

The story of the crystals can simply be an interesting anecdote, or it can alert us to the responsibility given to each one of us to co-operate with God in the healing and re-making of our world.

It means we have to choose all the time – will I love and be grateful for this situation, this person, this moment, this whatever, that I find so difficult, or will I complain, and winge and be angry? Will I let my fear and negativity spill over into everything or will I open myself to each moment and the opportunity it holds for love?

To actually choose to love and be grateful for what is not lovely, to love ourselves, to love those difficult people around us, to love even in the hard times, to remain open and welcoming when so often we would rather close up and resist and push things away – to love even then is not just a nice idea – it will actually change things.

While today we are sad to say farewell to Hans, we send him out to continue the ministry of love in a new community. We waited a long time for him. I said 'no' to a number of other curates – 'no, not this one, not that one, they're not right'. Finally Hans came and I knew 'yep, this one' and it was worth the wait.

There were many reasons for choosing Hans, but the main one for me - I knew he would be open to the ministry of love we share in this parish. I recognised his capacity to offer Christ's love, but equally, I knew he was open to receive love from this community. He would participate in the mutuality of love - we would awaken more of the potential in him and he would awaken more of the potential in us. His heart was available to us from the start.

We didn't need someone whose heart was held back from us.

We didn't need someone who was so defensive and closed that love would take a long time to get through.

We needed someone who would respond to the disciplines of love, whose inner being would awaken through the gentle presence of love in this place, who would be open to the epiphanies, the revealing of God in the ordinary, and someone who would readily share in that ministry of love and enhance it. And we haven't been disappointed.

We have all been changed by the word of love which Hans has spoken and been amongst us over these 4 years, and we have known epiphanies at times when we have seen God working through him. He too has been changed by the word of love which we have been and spoken to him. We have been privileged to watch him grow and become more grounded in himself over these years. We have journeyed with him for this time and we have grown in love for each other as members of the body of Christ, as companions and friends.

But now Hans, you will go on to continue this ministry of love in a new place. There will be times of new epiphany for you, times of light-filled awakening, times when a simple word of love from you changes a life. There will be times when epiphany comes to you through the open hearts of young people. There will be times when it all seems dark and God's revealing presence disappears and times when your open heart is wounded, times when you wound the open hearts of others.

But through it all, remember the story of the water crystal. Love is your calling, for that will keep you grounded in the incarnate Word which is Christ himself. That will be the sign to others that your ministry points beyond yourself to that greater Love that calls all people, all creation into wholeness.

It is sad to let you go, but now we release you to continue in the ministry of love which Christ has given you. You have shared with us, you have been epiphany for us at times, you have touched our lives and awoken us at times to God's loving presence, and you have received from us in the mutuality of love in this community of Christ.

Keep your heart open, tend its wounds but always keep it open so God's love will continue to flow through you. Nothing else matters.

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