

**EPIPHANY: AN ‘Ah hah’ MOMENT – COLLEEN CLAYTON -
SUNDAY 4TH JANUARY 2009**

Readings: Isa 60. 1-6, Ps 72. 1-7, 10-14, Eph 3. 1-12, Mtt 2. 1-12

Today, after all the gift giving of the Christmas season, we come to the feast of the Epiphany and the arrival of the magi and their gifts.

Gold – a present for royalty; representing power, wealth and might.

Frankincense – a gift for a priest; the scent of the temple and of the holy work that takes place there.

Myrrh – a spiced perfume often used for anointing the dead and dying. A prophetic gift, looking to the end of this baby’s life and the significance of his death.

Surprising gifts of great meaning given to a poor and vulnerable baby who was himself, full of great and surprising meaning.

The word Epiphany means a manifestation of the divine. An epiphany is a time when the essence and true meaning of something suddenly becomes apparent. It is an ‘ah hah!’ moment. For the Christian church, the Epiphany is the feast of the revelation of Christ to the gentiles, in other words, to all of us of non-Jewish background. It is a celebration of the surprise that the eternal Christ could be embodied in the baby Jesus. It is a time when we celebrate and grapple with what it means for all humanity that God became flesh.

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one to tell us of the visit of the magi, and even it tells us very little. Certainly it says nothing of the effect on their lives of the revelation of the Christ. In his poem, ‘The Journey of the Magi’, T.S. Eliot explores something of what it might have meant for them to be at that first revelation of Christ. After the bulk of the poem describes the difficulties of the journey, from refractory camel handlers to hostile, dirty villages, Eliot comes to this final stanza:

*“All this was a long time ago, I remember,
and I would do it again,
but set down this, set down this:
were we lead all that way for Birth or Death?
There was a Birth, certainly,
we had evidence and no doubt.
I have seen birth and death,
but had thought they were different.
This Birth was hard and bitter agony for us,*

*like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”*

Eliot understands that the encounter with God made flesh is a profoundly unsettling thing. In this poem he says that to see the reality of the birth of the Christ was, for the wise ones, like an encounter with their own death.

We are told that the Magi were wise, having studied the stars and searched for meaning there. They obviously had the physical resources for rich gifts and to make a long journey following this new star but they also had the imagination and spiritual depth to want to seek out the unknown and to look for answers beyond what they already knew. The Gospel tells us they were overwhelmed with joy when the star stopped and they knew they had found what they had been searching for.

Part of what we celebrate today is the search for the Christ that the wise ones of all times and places undertake. The wise always search for the Christ, joyful when their search is rewarded, longing to open their treasure chests and bring out their best gifts. But perhaps, as Eliot describes, to truly encounter the Christ means that life can never be the same again. We cannot return to the old dispensations. Or if we can, we cannot feel at ease there. All the wisdom that has led us to that point, all the riches we have brought to share are suddenly lost as we receive this new revelation of God.

In the reading from Ephesians that we heard today, the author tells us that what we receive in this revelation is the news of the boundless riches of Christ. This baby Jesus that the wise ones found, poor and lying in a manger, is also the eternal Christ. The wise ones brought treasures to give to the baby Jesus but in the person of Christ we find a treasure house that is vast and immeasurable. Gold will be spent, frankincense burnt and myrrh poured out but the Christ of God can be searched and explored with no possibility of ever coming to the end. Such a realisation, such an ‘ah hah!’ is the death of all the things we have thought we knew about ourselves and our world.

The reading from Ephesians goes on to say that the church is to make this revelation available to everyone in order that God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, might be known. Of course, by its very nature, an epiphany is always a surprise. We cannot expect to be comfortable with what God’s

wisdom might reveal next. We can expect it to be unknown and unthought of by us. Our task, therefore, as the church that bears the name of Christ, is to somehow look with eyes that are ready to see the Christ, no matter how unexpected the surroundings or circumstances might be. We are to prepare to say 'ah hah!' as God is revealed anew. We are to allow ourselves to be constantly amazed by the surprise of a birth that brings death and of a death that brings new birth, and we are to bring that surprising meaning to the world.

The rich variety of God's wisdom turns things upside down and sheds light where before there was only darkness.

Epiphany: the Messiah is born in a stable.

Epiphany: the Christ is crucified.

Epiphany: the tomb is empty.

Epiphany: God is not at all the way we expected.

'Ah hah!' God has surprised us again.

And so, having begun with one of Eliot's poems I would like to end with one of Leunig's. It is from his book '*A Common Prayer*' and I think it captures beautifully the nature of this season of Epiphany.

"God give us rain when we expect sun.

Give us music when we expect trouble.

Give us tears when we expect breakfast.

Give us dreams when we expect a storm.

Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.

God play with us, turn us sideways and around.

Amen."

Colleen Clayton