

‘Epiphany’ is a peculiar word. It doesn’t crop up in normal conversation very often, and if you ask people what it means they will probably mutter something about Kings and Christmas. So I looked it up. It comes from Greek and means ‘any sudden and important manifestation or realisation’, particularly of a divine or supernatural being. It’s nothing to do with journeys, or wise men, or special presents. It’s a word that pretentious people occasionally use to describe what the rest of us call a ‘lightbulb moment’. It isn’t even specifically about God; one of the Oxford Dictionary’s examples is about the epiphany of Zeus as a bull – the way he appeared when on earth.

The Christian church has adopted ‘Epiphany’ for one particular manifestation – realisation – of the incarnate Christ. It wasn’t the first one; that was to the shepherds. It wasn’t the only one; Simeon and Anna recognised him when he was brought to the temple at six weeks old. But providing you accept that the shepherds were Jewish by birth, which is probably true even if they were not exactly regulars at synagogue, this revelation does have great importance. It was the point at which, while he was still very young, the incarnate Christ was revealed to Gentiles. It happened very early, long before Jesus started his ministry, and it showed that God’s absolute intention was that his message of salvation was for everyone, whoever they were, and not exclusively for the Jews. Jewish writings and culture might have been based for millennia on the belief that the Jews were God’s chosen people, and they may have been right to begin with, but by this time God had other ideas.

Even the Jews who had believed in Jesus from the beginning were not going to be allowed to box him off as an exclusively Jewish Messiah. Jesus was for everyone, including everyone that the observant Jewish men who ran the religion regarded as not ‘people like us’, not people who were allowed to have an equal part in our affairs; Samaritans, women, tax-collectors, people who were ritually unclean, diseased, deformed or disabled, sinners. Think about all the times later on when Jesus went out of his way to make one after another of these non-persons feel included and valuable, and the arguments he had with the scribes and pharisees as a result. And while I would like to have a number of discussions with St Paul about other things, he was absolutely right about salvation being for everyone. Today’s Epistle couldn’t be more explicit.

As part of our Christian logic, the Epiphany has become particularly connected with two ideas: a manifestation of the incarnation and a journey. As with many other aspects of the Christmas story, much of what we ‘know’ about the Epiphany isn’t in the Bible. It’s just what WS Gilbert said ‘adds verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative’. I had to let the Christingle children into a terrible secret: nobody knows exactly how many wise men there were. There’s another not-quite-so secret: the only mentions of ‘king’ in the entire episode refer to Herod or Jesus. We don’t know where the wise men came from: ‘from the East’ is splendidly vague. We aren’t told how long their journey took. It might have been two years if the star appeared when Jesus was born and they immediately dropped whatever they were doing and set off. But it could have been a great deal shorter, while still having them come a considerable distance and being thoroughly foreign and exotic.

Nevertheless, the idea of a journey has become a fixture. It can be a helpful and illuminating metaphor. Countless books and sermons have been written about the ‘journey of faith’; I may even have been guilty of a few of the latter. You start off tentatively, maybe with very limited information and no idea where you’re going, and as you metaphorically travel your experience grows, your faith increases, you overcome setbacks and meet helpful (and less helpful) people on the way. Sometimes you have the feeling that God is very close and is guiding you; sometimes he seems impossibly far away and you struggle to understand why you ever started.

But eventually, with determination and persistence, you will develop a mature faith and be able to rest in God's love.

The people I've known whom I thought would have a mature faith say that there is no such thing. You may be a highly-experienced traveller and have built deep spiritual resources, but it doesn't get easier. It's like the elderly lady who said to a distinguished scientist: 'I'm so glad to have heard you speak. It's a subject on which I've always been so confused, and you understand it perfectly.' 'No, madam', he replied. 'I'm just confused on a far higher level.'

The wise men knew unequivocally and from the start what they were looking for. 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' Their astronomical observations and interpretation told them that a king had been born. They had no doubt about it, and their certainty frightened Herod. They weren't sure exactly where to find him. Local etiquette would have dictated that if you were looking for a child king – probably a crown prince – you'd ask the reigning king where he was. They were looking for a conventional prince, who would probably be somewhere in the royal palace with the queen and the nursemaids. But, as WS Gilbert put it in a different context: 'Things are seldom what they seem'. Their Epiphany – their lightbulb moment – was the realisation that the person they had come to find was in an ordinary house; so ordinary that the star had to stop over it or they would never have noticed; was a child who had unbelievably ordinary parents; and yet somehow they knew that this was the son of God. So they knelt down and worshipped him and gave him the gifts they had brought for a monarch, which turned out to be just as appropriate for the son of God.

The shepherds, who had no expectations, heard, saw and believed. Simeon and Anna, who were expecting the Messiah to appear in the temple, saw and believed. The wise men, expecting a royal child in a noble household, saw and believed. All of them understood immediately whose presence they had come into. That was the real Epiphany.

Our own experience may not be the same. To some the revelation comes early, and we then try to live in its light. Others struggle towards it for years, maybe a lifetime. Some of us lose an initial conviction and give up, maybe to return later. For many people, revelation comes with reflection and hindsight: 'That was when I met God!' Those of us who have more confidence in what we have experienced need to help those of us who are fighting to understand or are frightened at the implications. The worst thing we can do is to squelch someone else's glimmering of hope with our own certainties. We should talk about these things more – where we need help and where we have received it. The wise men returned by a different road, not just physically but spiritually. They can't have travelled all the way in stunned silence. They would have talked everything over and helped each other to understand. So should we.