

Epiphany Sunday 2008

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Matthew 2:9-11

My daughter's girlfriend asked me recently what "epiphany" means. I wasn't sure if this was a religious question or a vocabulary question. Stacie has no background in church or religion and she asks me lots of questions; some I can dispose of easily and some, not so much. For example, she asked me the other day about the Serbian Orthodox, and I fell into a discussion about the *filioque* clause, and whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or from the Father alone. And I really don't know anything about the Serbian Orthodox, so I probably should have said, 'Google them,' but I am supposed to be the expert.

As to Epiphany, I told her the story of the Magi, which of course she knew—we all know this story, "churched" or not—; told about the three pagan wise men, astrologers, or magicians, men of learning and wise counsel from the East; how they had seen the star that was the sign that a Jewish Messiah had been born, and traveled to Jerusalem to tell King Herod about the star, and then traveled to Bethlehem to see the baby. "And when they got there, " I concluded, "they said, 'aha! This really is the Messiah!' And that was their epiphany, their revelation, their sudden understanding. And we have a religious holiday to celebrate that."

So in the vernacular, I told Stacie, an epiphany means such a revelation, an 'aha' moment.

"Oh, that's what I had in the car!" she said, "an *aha* moment. I want to buy a mountain and develop a ski resort.. I did not say, *No, what you had was a pipe dream.* " I was a good mother-in-law. I held my tongue.

But the conversation made me reflect about how we do use *epiphany* in this secular or vernacular sense all the time, to mean a sudden understanding. And how we therefore read that common meaning back into the old and familiar and beloved story, and may therefore secularize the holy wonder of these events.

Of course, today, in our wisdom, we understand that these "events" are fiction. Modern biblical scholarship tells us that the nativity narratives in Matthew's and Luke's gospels are inventions by those authors to give majesty and supernatural meaning to the

birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and to put forth as frame and foreshadowing certain themes of their particular theologies.

And Matthew's theology stresses how Jesus comes as a light to lighten the Gentiles, and how the mandate of Jesus' followers is to preach the Gospel to all nations and people. The Magi, who help to get Matthew's story up and running, are such people. They are from away; they are Gentiles, pagans, and conspicuously so; they practice the pagan art or science of astrology and the readers of dreams; and they are, presumably, counselors to distant oriental potentates. They are, as we say currently, "Other."

And yet these *Others* come from afar, with burning curiosity, to check out the rumor manifested by the strange star. Somehow they are compelled to travel, and to investigate. Who knows what they brought with them; incredulity, skepticism, the intent to debunk the propaganda of an alien belief system? Maybe. But they also brought gifts: gold, incense, and myrrh. So presumably they brought with them as well open minds, the capacity for awe, respect, and, reverence. And they stayed to worship.

I said a few moments ago that, in our modern wisdom, we understand that these events are fiction, that they are "not true." But for Matthew and the other Gospels our concept of truth, as in *accuracy*, would have had no meaning. For them, truth was *in meaning*, not in facts. Truth lay deeper than facts. And so, if the Magi are fictional characters, what truth do they represent?

For Matthew, of course, they represent the power of the Gospel to inspire and to convert. These Gentiles are moved to awe and worship by the sight of the infant Savior, and they come to believe the truth of the Good News. And of course they can represent the same to us. But I think the Magi can also represent something just as critical in our contemporary, divided, and diverse world: they tell the story of the power of religious truth whenever and wherever we encounter it; the power of religious truth to awe, to inspire, to convert. That power is not confined to Christianity, it inheres in Judaism and Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism and many other religions as well.

And they tell the story of open-mindedness, of the ability to encounter the "Other" – for Jesus, Mary and Joseph are as Other to them as they are to the Holy Family – the ability to encounter the Other with respect, and awe, and indeed, with reverence. Surely, this is a story sorely needed in our time. A time when it can seem, all too often, that as Isaiah says, *darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.*

Only think of Iraq. Of Pakistan. Of Mitt Romney's view of a Christian nation united against pagans and infidels. There's darkness. We need the gifts of the Magi; the gifts of openmindedness and courage, the gifts of respect and reverence in the face of difference.

I have a favorite poem about the Magi. I know I've quoted it here before, but so long ago I can't find when. And anyway, a good poem is always worth repeating. The poem is by T. S. Eliot and it's called *The Journey of the Magi*.

The Journey of the Magi

T.S. Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times when we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.

At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had 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.

The poem talks about the conversion of the Magi from disgruntlement to wonder.

Eliot's is a very Christian vision and not so open to diversity, when at the end he talks

about “an alien people clutching their gods.” But Eliot has the zeal of the convert, and his was a different time.

Eliot does convey the power and religious dimension possible when we encounter the Other: *this Birth was/Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death*. To encounter someone, or something, so radically unexpected, so entirely different, and to take that Other in completely: that is a kind of death. It’s a death to our sense of command, of certainty, of being in charge.

A holy death. And that encounter is a birth as well; birth of a new consciousness, a bolder comprehension of the marvelous diversity of God’s world and God’s children; a startling taking in of God’s infinite promise. That’s Epiphany,

*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from
Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.*

Alleluia !Amen