

St James Leith – 8<sup>th</sup> January 2012 – Final

**Genesis 1.1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11**

### **The dancer's story**

I was given a marvellous little book for Christmas, on contemplative practices. It's by Martin Laird, and it is called *Into the Silent Land*.<sup>1</sup> He talks about how difficult it is to get past the mind's buzzing, repetitive chatter to places where we can apprehend or perceive something of the divine. He tells the story of a world-class dancer, a prima donna whose grace and beauty and power onstage bear almost no resemblance to the chaos in her mind when she is off-stage. Admitting that she was obsessive and tortuously perfectionist, she described her inner state as "a series of videos she constantly played and constantly watched. What were these videos? Usually something about how she wasn't quite up to standard, not only in ballet, but in any area of her life. Another set of videos showed her intense anger, but deeper than those were the videos of fear, fear of what the critics might say, fear that her husband might suddenly leave her, fear of being alone.

"And videos about pain. The worst came from childhood. One day her mother walked into her bedroom as she sat looking at herself in the mirror. The mother said to her, I hope you don't think you are beautiful." She was indeed beautiful, in every season of life – young girl, adolescent, young woman, mature woman. She was beautiful. But this beauty became a gag knotted behind her, for she believed she was ugly.

And so the videos play on. Even if she isn't watching the video and pressing rewind to watch it again, and again, the video still plays in the background, like some awful music in a shopping mall.

"She did find solace. In long walks out on the Yorkshire Moors. If she walked long enough, her roiling mind began to settle. The expanse of heather was scented balm that soothed the throbbing anger, fear and pain. On one occasion her anxiety began to drop, she said, to fall away like layers of scarves. Suddenly she was aware of being immersed in a sacred presence that upheld her and everything."

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Laird *Into the Silent Land: The Practice of Contemplation* (London, DLT:

It only happened once, this experience on the moors, but it was a turning point in her life and drew her into a way of prayer. She knew from her own experience that there was something in her that was deeper than her pain and anxiety, and that when the chaos of the mind was quieted, the sense of anguish gave way to a sense of divine presence.

I'll come back to the dancer, this is part of my reflection today on epiphanies – on revelations. Our season of Epiphany - literally “striking appearance” - focuses on God’s self revelation in Jesus not only to Israel, but also to the Gentiles, to those nations thought outside the realm of God’s blessing. The story of the visit 3 Magi symbolises this.

The Eastern orthodox church will soon celebrate the **feast of Theophany**, literally, “vision of God” and focuses on the Baptism of Jesus, as we have read about today in Mark’s Gospel.

These 8 short verses from Mark are characteristically punchy, terse and immediate. Mark doesn’t hang about; he isn’t interested in facts and details, in personalities and relationships. He isn’t writing history, he isn’t writing a biography, he is writing a gospel, he is proclaiming the good news, and right from the start he wants to establish two things about Jesus for the reader: The first is the **identity** of Jesus: who he is, how he fits into the prophetic promises of God for Israel and the rest of creation. The second thing Mark is telling us here is about the **authority** of Jesus, what is the nature of his power and where – who - it comes from.

Theophany, Epiphany, we are talking about witnessing an appearance that is profound, quite possibly dramatic, and that you can’t go away from unchanged. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, you are marked. Your whole life may be turned around, forever.

As Duncan said in the email notices about this epiphany, it doesn’t happen like that often or even to all of us, but there are moments when God sets his seal on us, reveals his presence, or pours out his grace.

What might be the divine purpose of these lesser epiphany moments?

Some of you may recall, if you heard me talking about Caesar’s coin a couple of months ago, and showing you a picture from Toy

Story, of Woody with Andy's name written on the bottom of his boot - and I asked, how do you know you belong to God, if you don't have his name tattooed on you?

A good one to ponder, that. Of course other people will only know, not by some sign or badge, but by the fruits of the Spirit of God - you know the list:

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Longsuffering
- [Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control]

Often we are not aware of showing these fruits effectively, and that is perhaps for the best. But how are we to know of the seal that God has set upon us?

Some people will recall sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and will trust in the promises of God wrapped up in those mysteries. Some will regard a covenant-type moment in which a personal commitment was made in the faith that hands held you that were more secure than any human hands. Some can point to Scriptural assurances. Some point to the traditions and beliefs of a 2000 year old Church. Some are instinctively and more or less unquestioningly part of a community or family of faith, and accept and adopt the family's values and Christian identity without further soul-searching. Some on the other hand, long for a God to show a face, to give an undeniable sign of recognition Or of healing. Of a parent's caring and missing embrace.

### **Iona**

I had such an epiphany experience once on Iona, some 40 years ago now – I was 5 – no I was 20 – I haven't talked about it very much, I went as a searcher, rather than a believer, the only theology I had done was some comparative religion – but I had been drawn by a certain mystique and the reputation Iona had as a *liminal* place, a thin place, where the curtain separating earth and

heaven was or could be very thin. And for 48 hours whether in the Abbey or on the beach or the hillside lashed by the rain, for 48 hours or so I was in tears: tears of a strange, deep joy – an overwhelming sense that I – who lost my father when I was nine – I had a heavenly parent who *loved* me, and that Jesus was not just an historical figure, but a rich warm, welcoming presence, who fully accepted and loved me. I did not understand how, but that was when Jesus became real to me.

When I got back to university and told a friend about it – he was a grad student, and an Episcopal clergyman, and he said, “Well, you have had a mystical experience – tho I’m not sure it’s a Christian experience.” He went on, “I am jealous, because nothing like that has ever happened to me.” It would take me a few years before I could call myself a Christian, and a few years more to work out a theology explaining this I-and Thou encounter. But the gift of faith given at that time seemed to be summed up for me by Job’s assertion, “I know that my Redeemer lives.”

### **Epiphany and Peak Experiences**

Of course my experience chimes with that of many others, some of them from mystical traditions, Christian, Sufi, etc, but not all of them religious by any means. It was the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow who coined the term ‘peak experience’ in order to try to separate such an exalted psychological state from what he saw as religious trappings. [He suggested that ‘peak experiences’ were possible for all individuals. He maintained that there was a hierarchy of needs, from the physiological – food sleep warmth – through security and intimate relationships, to having self-esteem, to being in the famous phrase, self-actualised. He proposed that peak experiences were more likely as more of the hierarchy of needs were satisfied.]

“Maslow describes how the peak experience tends to be uplifting and ego-transcending; it releases creative energies; it affirms the meaning and value of existence; it gives a sense of purpose to the individual; it gives a feeling of integration; it leaves a permanent mark on the individual, evidently changing them for the better. Peak experiences can be therapeutic in that they tend to increase

the individual's free will, self-determination, creativity, and empathy."<sup>2</sup>

Quite often though a sense of a transcendent other or an awareness of a greater unity is experienced. For our purposes a definition of an epiphany moment that is not too religiously specific might read like this:

dfn of **epiphany** "moments of clarity or ecstasy when the enormity of the wonder of the physical world, harmony with others, and relationship with the transcendent, [with God] are felt in powerful, transformational ways."

But rather than create a must-have sense of these moments, let me go back to the baptism of Jesus that Mark gives us, and approach epiphanies from that direction.

(As it is quite short, why not read the text with me again)

Now John, is clearly identified in terms of Israel's prophetic history. So when Jesus is baptised by him, Jesus is placed in this lineage, and as part of God's plan for, and actions on behalf of Israel. But the epiphany in vs 10 & 11 marks a radical shift, a discontinuity, a new thing that God is doing.

There are powerful images here, good to dwell on. Now I know that there are unavoidable questions for some about what it is that Jesus saw, and what those present saw and understood. But these are ultimately fruitless questions, especially for moderns with a completely different cosmology. Asking what was behind the sky, or what the Holy Spirit looked like can miss the story's insistence that in this wilderness setting, somehow Jesus experienced the Spirit.

So the account gives us two striking images: the first is of the sky being ripped or torn open, violently, unmistakably. The same verb *schizoi* is used as of the tearing of the veil in the temple at the crucifixion in Mark 15. It's as if an invisible curtain right in front of you is suddenly drawn aside to reveal an utterly different reality. It is the ultimate attention-grabbing device, and a demonstration of the power of an awesome, unstoppable God, a power capable of transforming any mean human situation, capable indeed of mutating an entire religious system from one based on multiple scapegoats to one based on the one sacrifice for sins, made once and for all. A powerful, transforming God.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak\\_experience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak_experience) Accessed 07/1/12

The other **image is of the dove**. A second, very different picture of God. The dove is a symbol of graceful softness, of beauty in its eyes and feathers, but it also represents, as any winged creature did, something of heaven 'up there'. Finally we might want to recall the spirit of God in Genesis 1, hovering over the waters of chaos. This dove is a rich and profound symbol of God's Spirit, coming down to establish the identity and authority of Jesus, and as happens next in the Gospel, it is that same Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, foreshadowing his purpose and destiny, giving a hint of trials to come.

And after these two images, the words Jesus heard. "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Powerful words that we can assume did not just form a kind of cosmic identity pass for the divine Jesus, but spoke to the soul of a human Jesus in terms of love, in terms of parenting and kinship, in terms of approval.

I am sure you know of children who grow up without a father ever saying to them, (either in words looks or in hugs) "You are my dear child." Let alone, "I am pleased with you." Where fathers are not angry and self-absorbed, they are often too tongue tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they are with them.

So is not this an epiphany that matters to us?. Tom Wright maintains in his commentary on Mark that "any early Christian reading this passage would also, of course, believe that their own baptism into Jesus the Messiah was the moment when, for them, the curtain had been drawn back and these words had been spoken to them.' And these are words that will strengthen and equip when we are treading the same road as Jesus, who, "precisely because he is God's dear son, follows a road that leads through dry and dusty paths, through temptation and apparent failure."<sup>3</sup>

Is not this the epiphany we need?

And what of the dancer on the Yorkshire Moors, and those moments when we realise that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves? These are moments no one has been able to predict or

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright *Mark for Everyone* (London, SPCK: 2001)

to manufacture without drugs, for they come as gifts of divine grace. Contemplative practices of prayer, the learned directing of mental attention, can put us in the way of epiphanies. Listening. Looking. Silence.

Let me finish with a poem by R.S. Thomas, the Welsh poet we were reading in the poetry group before Christmas, it is entitled The Moor

The Moor by R.S. Thomas

It was like church to me.

I entered it on soft foot,

Breath held like a cap in the hand.

It was quiet.

What God was there made himself felt,

Not listened to, in clean colours

That brought a moistening of the eye,

In movement of the wind over grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness

Of the heart's passions - that was praise

Enough, and the mind's cession

Of its kingdom. I walked on,

Simple and poor, while the air crumbled

And broke on me generously as bread.

Geoffrey Stevenson  
Leith

First Sunday after Epiphany