

## Epiphany 2010

When Albert Einstein was a child someone gave him a compass as a gift, and showed him how it worked. It was an epiphany for he suddenly realized that there were unseen forces that affected the physical world. He spent the rest of his life trying to understand those forces, and in the process advanced physics immeasurably. When Charles Darwin was on the voyage on the Beagle trying to understand the variety of animals he had seen, the idea of natural selection seemed to come to him in a flash of insight. It was an epiphany that led to a whole new way of understanding. C.S Lewis said that on a bus ride in London to the zoo with his brother, he made his commitment to being a Christian. He got on the bus a non-believer, and off the bus a believer. It was an epiphany that led Lewis to become one of the most influential Christian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Epiphanies are like that. We are suddenly confronted with a whole new way of looking at something, and it can change our lives. I think epiphanies can come in many forms – it may be a vision, or a religious experience. It may be a flash of insight. It may be a dream. It usually happens within some kind of context which has us open to a new way of thinking and seeing. Darwin was already pondering how the animals he studied could have the variations he discovered. C.S. Lewis had been in long discussion with J.R.R. Tolkien.

We may have some experience of epiphanies ourselves. How many of you know what it is like to go to bed with some weighty problem which seems to have no good solution, and we wake up with a new answer. We exclaim “Aha!” That’s why we say we should sleep on it when we have a problem. Our brains are more open to new ways of thinking when they are not cluttered by the desperation of not getting clear answers.

I think that there are three important aspects to epiphanies. They are a sudden insight into a truth that could not likely have been arrived at through logical deduction. Epiphanies ask us to see things in a new light, and can be life changing. Third, epiphanies present us with a choice as to whether to accept them or not, since they may require us to give up our old cherished ways of perceiving. A comfortable lie can be easier to live with than a hard truth. We can choose to live in truth or to live the lie.

Of course, the Epiphany that we celebrate today is a special kind of Aha! moment. It literally means the shining forth, or revelation of God to humankind in human form. Jesus’ birth is revealed to the gentiles as the wise men from the East seek an answer to the question, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They discover that he is more than king of the Jews, he is king of all humanity. What an outrageous claim! It is a whole new way of looking at the world, and it has changed the world. This Jesus is not the savior for a small ethnic group of people, but for everyone, for the whole world. It went against the whole notion of who God was for most people. It was common for tribes and nations to have their own gods, who looked after their own small clan. Baal was the god of the Canaanites, Zeus the god of the Romans. The emperor was proclaimed a god, and he was to be worshipped. But their gods were too small. Jesus, the Christ, was to be the reconciler of all nations. God the Father would be the God of all.

Joseph received an epiphany when the angel of the Lord came to him to tell him that Mary was with child, and that he was not to put her away. It was stuff that was hard to believe, and harder to live with as he took on some of the stigma that would have been hers alone as a single mother. But Joseph somehow knew in his guts that what the angel said to him was true. He chose to live in that truth, and it took great courage. Then the angel came again, this time to warn him that he must flee to Egypt. This second epiphany led to a long journey, living as

refugees. He could have done this with his family only if he knew deep in his heart that he was living the truth.

The first epiphany to the wise men was the star. They had scanned the skies for years looking for signs. They were prepared, and must have felt the significance of truth that the star represented in order to undertake such a journey on so nebulous a mission. Then they experienced for themselves the presence of Christ in that stable long ago, and somehow in their guts they knew the truth that this was the Savior for all mankind. Because they knew that truth had to be protected, they decided that their journey would take them by another road.

Then there is Herod. He too received an epiphany by the visit of the wise men. I think he too somehow knew it his gut that this newborn child was a king. But instead of embracing this truth, he was threatened by it. There are those who seek advantage, those who want to be on top, to dominate and control. Herod was such a man, and his tools were corruption and power. The cost was high. Herod had to be constantly vigilant for any hint of opposition, paranoid and distrustful of everyone, ruthless in protecting his position. Herod murdered his own wife, his mother-in-law, and even three of his own children, because he felt threatened. There was no journey for Herod, no adventure, no stepping out into a new reality. He chose to stay home and fearfully consolidate his power. He chose to live the lie, and so he fell into a kind of evil madness.

As we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, we are challenged by the truth of this baby in stable. Is this the Christ? This is not something that most of us can come to through logical deduction. We know somehow deep in our guts the truth that this is God's revelation of himself to all of creation. We come to it by faith. How has he changed the way we see the world? If this is the Christ we begin to see the world as a place of hope and not despair. We see all of creation as beloved by God, that we are beloved by God, and that goodness and love are the powers that will have their way in the end. Knowing that truth, how will we choose to live our lives? It may be more comfortable to live the lie, to pursue the things the world has to offer like money, power, and security. But then we risk falling into the evil madness of quiet desperation and meaninglessness.

Epiphany calls us to continue our journey home by another road, like the wise men. Epiphany calls us to be refugees from our dominant culture. On this journey we seek refuge in worship that asks us to give up some of our precious time. On our journey we seek to become peacemakers and reconcilers. On our journey we share our truth, our epiphany, with those who have not yet seen it for themselves so that they might know at least the potential for something so much bigger, so much better, so much more true.

T.S. Eliot wrote in *Little Gidding*:

“We shall not cease from exploring, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.”

We started our journey in the heart of God. Epiphany calls us to a journey of exploration, to follow another road. And when we are at the end of our journey we will find that we have returned home where we started, and we will know the truth -- that home is the heart of God.