

Encountering with Christ

a sermon preached on the

Feast of the Epiphany

Sunday 4 January 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Religious *experience* is, by definition, novel, transformative, progressive. Religious *tradition*, however, seems to inevitably become its opposite. The novel becomes the familiar. The transformative becomes the confirmative. The progressive becomes the conservative. I suppose this is inevitable, since religious tradition, by definition, is an attempt to contain and preserve an original experience and insight. This containment and preservation is bound to foster an over-familiarity, a predictability, and a safety.

Today's story is one of the most familiar of this time of the year, much favoured by greeting card manufacturers and children's nativity plays. We all know about these exotic visitors from the east, and their camels and their gifts offered to the baby in Bethlehem. As with most things Christmas, familiarity breeds sentimentality, which is a form of safety. This is actually a curse upon the religious tradition, for sentimentalising inevitably leads to separation from an original experience – and soon the stories have little or nothing to do with us personally.

So T S Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' is helpful:

'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' ...
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.

Eliot begins with familiar images – winter, a cold journey, a birth. But there is a certain shock in his question 'birth or death?' "The birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." Piercing the 'festive season' sentimentality, Eliot intuits that these *magoi* were shaken to the core of their being by raw and un-tameable experience, by something which felt as much like a dying as a birthing. They returned to their places, but no longer at ease 'in the old dispensation', the familiar and comfortable. Because of what they have witnessed they should be glad of another death. Something of the original experiential shock is restored to the story of the Magi by Eliot. For this birth is indeed a shock, and it is indeed a dying. The familiar religious dispensation dies as a consequence of this manifestation, this epiphany. Because of what they have experienced they can no longer be the same. They may return to their home land, they may return to their own people, yes, but things can no longer be the same. There is no place for the familiar and the sentimental. There is a death of religious

tradition which this experience of birth precipitates.

Well this is certainly an improvement on the sentimentalised greeting card version of today's story. Yet even Eliot's poem leaves us to some extent in a dim and distant historical past. And this is the ever-present danger of religious tradition, that we are left with mere external, historical artefacts - something experienced by someone else, in some other time and place, something to merely 'believe in'. The true religious question, however, is always the question about the present. 'Epiphany', or manifestation, is about experience, yours and mine in the here and now. For the story to be of any use at all there must be a real and vital continuity between the experience of those ancient *magoi* and the experience of you and me. For religious *experience* is, of necessity, novel, transformative, progressive. Religious experience reveals something new, it changes the way we view ourselves and others, it liberates us. Religious experience cannot be contained in books, creeds, even liturgies.

The day after Mellory Manning's memorial service this week a small posy of flowers appeared on the ground in front of the belltower. A handwritten note placed next to it read thus:

December 2008

Please Take Care.

Although I am not Religious I have an ABSOLUTE Belief in Jesus Christ. I Have to have this Belief – to get me “through”.

As a Child/Teen I was Repeatedly, I can't say the word – BUT, I can Spell “it” RAPED on my way to school... YUK.

They took away my Innocence AS A CHILD. But “They” can Never Take away our ability to Love.

I now Have - A Beautiful Daughter – University Educated and now the Mother of my Grandson – Jack! I also have a lovely Son – Michael – and identical Twins!!

Innocence – that comes from within our Hearts.

Again – Please Take Care of you.

God Bless.

It's heart-breaking even to read such a note. Here is no high-falutin religious rhetoric. Rather, this is earthy and basic theology. Like many people, she declares that she is not 'religious' – but I suspect that's more a protest against the condemnation and self-righteousness which religious tribalism breeds. Who would not be moved in their guts by such horrendous things, and by such courage and defiance. I am unable to imagine the world inhabited by the woman who wrote that note. By the grace of God the violence done to her remains beyond my experience. Whilst I may lament her choice to work on Manchester Street, because it seems to me that she remains exiled from her deepest true self, yet I am deeply moved by her determination. Whilst I suspect that what she and I believe about Jesus may vary, yet I am struck by the fact that as a consequence of her encounter, whatever it may be, she chooses love not hate. Whilst I have no access to the epiphany, the manifestation, of Jesus which energises this choosing, yet I cannot escape the conclusion that whatever it was that she saw, the experience revealed something new, it changed the way she views herself and others, it is liberating her. I may conclude that her liberation remains partial, but the fact is that I have to admit that this is true of me also. The brutality and depravity of the abuse against her dehumanised her and robbed her of dignity – yet in her encounter with Jesus, whatever that was, she found something new, a person choosing love over hate. What has been familiar to her – brutality – is giving way to something new, love. What seemed confirmed about her status as a person – worthlessness – is giving way to something transformative, a knowledge that what comes out of the heart of a person is what matters. What must have seemed like the prison of isolation to that small girl is giving way to the progress of connectedness to others.

Who knows what 'star' may have led her to the Christ. The point is that like the *magoi* and like the rest of us in the encounter with Christ we experience both a birthing and dying. We know in our depths that we can never live comfortably in the old dispensation, whatever that might be for each of us. The agony which is common to us all is the inner knowledge that the old dispensation provides us with a certain security and comfort, yet we know simultaneously that we cannot remain there.

Religious *experience* is, by definition, novel, transformative, progressive, not mere historical artefact, out there and back there. As for the *magoi*, our religious experience also transforms our religious *tradition*. The familiar gives way to the novel. The confirmative gives way to the transformative. The conservative gives way to the progressive.

We return to our places, our little Kingdoms, each of us,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation
with an alien people clutching their gods.
We should be glad of another death.