

*Weds January 6th 2010
Epiphany Choral Evensong*

*King's College London Chapel
BBC Radio 3*

EPIPHANY MEDITATIONS

FIRST MEDITATION: WHO IS THIS BABY?

At 10.44 on Christmas morning, when most people were opening presents at home, or worshipping the babe of Bethlehem at church, I received an email on my Blackberry telling me about 'January deals in electronics' ! Christmas did not last long in cyberspace, or on the High Street, as the decorations were quickly removed for the new year sales. And yet, as the old carol reminds us, December 25th is only the 'first day of Christmas' – and here we are on the twelfth day, though not admittedly accompanied by the various lords a-leaping, swans swimming, five gold rings, and the inevitable 'partridge in a pear tree'. The traditional observance of the twelve days between the visit of the shepherds on Christmas night and today's arrival of strange magi from the East gives us time to reflect upon that child who was laid in the manger because 'there was no room' for him in the commercial activities of the inn, nor, it seems, of the in(n)ternet.

Yet this child remains an extraordinary challenge, even for those who ignore him as much today as two thousand years ago. What was so special about a teenage pregnancy, delivered after his mother had travelled the length of the country on a donkey, only to find nowhere to have her baby? So there he was, lying

in an animals' feeding trough in the back yard of a pub in a remote backwater of the Roman empire. Hardly an auspicious start in life – yet even then, shepherds came to visit the family, with odd tales of strange lights in the sky and heavenly music which sent them. But not something – or someone – you might remember twelve days later, let alone two millennia.

The word epiphany in Greek – *epiphaneia* – means 'manifestation', that is, how the identity of this child becomes manifest, or clearly apparent. The first clue is the arrival of these mystical visitors from the East, celebrated in our Introit, *Omnes de Saba*, based partly upon that reading from Isaiah 60, describing kings from Sheba coming to bring gifts of gold and frankincense. As the Dean of King's College London, I love that verse from Isaiah 60, that 'Kings shall come to the brightness of your dawn' – and I hope that this is true of our College! But why would eastern monarchs bring expensive gifts to a nondescript child in a stable? Actually, originally they were not kings: our second reading from Matthew 2 describes them more properly simply as 'wise men'. Well, given that our motto at College is *sancte et sapienter* (with holiness and wisdom), we hope that all at King's are wise! And these eastern visitors were students, students of wisdom who searched the night skies and followed the illumination to them, all the way to this child's bedside, believing that his glory would light up the darkness. As St John put it at the end of the prologue to his gospel in words used for our first anthem by Philippe Rogier, this glory was because *verbum caro factum est*, 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.14). That really is quite a manifestation, a real 'epiphany', and all we can do, like the wise kings, is to give thanks and be joyful in the Lord.

SECOND MEDITATION: WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE?

In the first couple of centuries after this child's birth, the wise men became symbols of all who are wise, and whose wisdom prompts them to search for Christ and bring him gifts as a response. The links between their gifts and those verses from Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 in the Introit turned them into kings in Christian devotion. Some early catacomb paintings depict as many as twelve of them, but they settled down into three kings, one for each of the gold, frankincense and myrrh. Many others emulated their search – amongst whom was Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine. After her son had made Christianity the main religion of the Roman Empire, Helena herself went on a search in the Holy Land to find relics of the true cross. In Evelyn Waugh's novel, she likens herself to the 'three royal sages who had come so far to adore him', as we just heard. Like them, she too was a latecomer – but also like them, she was not turned away and 'found room before the manger'.

It is easy to get bogged down in the prophetic explanations of gold, frankincense and myrrh, so beloved of hymn writers, alluding to the child's sovereignty, deity and coming death. But Helena is clear that the most important thing about the gifts is that 'they were brought with love', as indeed was her own search. This is the primary response which God seeks from all human beings through the manifestation of his son in the babe of Bethlehem. This response is not one which can be found in the January Sales, or purchased on line, like my Christmas morning email.

The first to respond was, of course, Mary herself, with her gentle acceptance ‘let it be with me according to your word’ (Luke 1.38). Her reaction is celebrated in her great hymn, the *Magnificat*, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’ with its extraordinary vision of a world turned topsy-turvy by a God made manifest in her little baby, a God who fills the hungry with good things and lifts up the lowly, while the rich and powerful are sent away empty (Luke 1.46-55). In his festive setting of the *Magnificat* for Christmas which we will hear next, Hieronymus Praetorius deliberately chose to include verses from two carols: first comes Mary’s request to her ‘dear Joseph’, *Joseph lieber, Joseph mein*, to ‘rock my darling child’, the one who is, nonetheless, the promised king of Israel. Secondly, he interspersed verses of *In Dulci Jubilo*, looking forward to the full manifestation of this Child ‘where the angels sing new songs and bells ring in the Court of the King – O that we were there!’ That, and only that, is the response which God desires from all of us, whether we are early or late, shepherd or king, wise or simple, that we too are ‘brought with love’ to his epiphany – ‘O that we were there!’

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