

Epiphany
4/1/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Two texts for Epiphany:

1. *“For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you... Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60: 2-3)*
2. *“Grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ” (Ephes.3: 8)*

The Old Testament can sometimes be more than a little confronting, counter-cultural as it is all the way down. Today is a case in point. People on the whole, and understandably, don't take kindly to being told that they are enmeshed in darkness. And to underline the point, not just a mildly greying sky, we hear, but a “thick darkness”. Moreover a blackness affecting not just other people - though never, of course, us - but an all encompassing, thick darkness over ‘the peoples’ - plural we note, *peoples*, not singular, ‘people’. We conclude that Biblical reality requires that darkness be experienced globally, not merely locally - and that seems reasonable enough as the C20 has morphed into the C21.

The point originally was that if there is to be an epiphany – a showing or shining around – for that is the meaning of the word epiphany - then the prospect of the phenomenon of light inevitably requires an accompanying darkness for it to be recognisable. So it is that our text is promising an epiphany first of all for Israel - that in due course there will be a return of the exiles from the darkness of Babylon to the light of a reconstituted Jerusalem, then to be followed by a pilgrimage of Gentiles to that city after the rebuilding of the holy place.

Light, not just for Israel but for the whole creation - this will show itself later to be the primary metaphor taken up by the New Testament. We ought not to be surprised that cosmic light will appear as the symbol of this new beginning in the fateful journey of the magi, lit as their way is by a star, and bringing, as they must, their gifts foreshadowed by Isaiah of gold and frankincense – no myrrh for Isaiah! Their meaning: gold for a global king, and frankincense to cover the anticipatory stench of his future crucified death.

We know only too well the subsequent history that this epiphany has unleashed, culminating as we have it in today's epistle with Paul's bursting the boundaries of the initial revelation limited to the Jews, by bringing to the Gentiles a new light - the news of the boundless riches of Christ.

All this is well and good. But where are we in all this 2000 years later?

Who are our contemporary Gentiles? What if anything can be expected of an epiphany in the increasing darkness of a culturally exhausted de-Christianised Western world?: a darkness, whether of wilful incomprehension, or of a bland superficiality, or of simple supine complacency - where even informed religious faith is equated with unintelligence in the brave new world of “scientific” fundamentalism.

However the wider culture may be described, the fact is that we still have not discovered how to preach and speak and write for our own time - and the signs are not encouraging that we will be permitted to try. The field may be ripe for harvest, but we trample around in sown fields.

None of us, of course, is permitted to despise the first sowers. But the gospel seeks us out at every level and stage of historical possibilities - it seeks us not only in the structure of equally departed, as well as newly burgeoning, religions. It seeks us out also on the icy flats of all the nihilisms surrounding us; it seeks us out in belief; it seeks us out in superstition; it seeks us out in unbelief.

We need no reminder that secularism has won the day, a global phenomenon in which the sacred is there only to be frozen in time as global secularist tourists, armed now as they are with their narcissistic ‘selfie’ sticks – and masquerading as aesthetic Christians in their brief forays into the northern hemisphere of a departed Christendom, only to return home apparently unmoved by their recorded images. Well might we ask: Epiphany where are you?

The truth is surely daily impressing itself on us – that in such a time we cannot invent the instruments of deliverance, but must allow them to be given to us. Have not the depths from which Christians must cry become deeper? Or that we have a longer road to travel than we have imagined to get out of our own peculiar deserts?

Consider how a sharp dividing line is increasingly being drawn between religious belief and religious practice. Christians are being reminded on every hand that they can believe whatever they like, and do what they like, within their churches – what they can’t do is to speak about, or act on, those beliefs in public. Christians are increasingly presumed to be “in the way”. Plainly the best means to keep Christianity private is to keep Christians quiet. Incrementally, it is clear, our lips are being sealed for us, but we ought at least to pray that they may be opened. So, well might we cry: Epiphany where are you?

And yet all is not lost. Living as we do in the long aftermath of Christendom’s political, social, and cultural collapse, we may yet be well situated to consider anew the true relation between that faith ‘once delivered to the saints’ and the native forms of contemporary society in which a radically new story is being told. If, as is the truth of the epistle today, that the gospel arrived *in* history as the proclamation of a convulsive disruption *of* gentile history, it entailed then a genuinely subversive rejection of many of the most venerable cultic, social and philosophical wisdoms of the ancient world. In its first dawning, the Gospel issued a pressing command to come forth out of the apparently incontrovertible assumptions of the prevailing society. The same command is ours too. The question is: how?

Perhaps the place to start is the basic recognition that any moments of pure interruption can be sustained for only a very brief period. Virtually all of Christian history has been a triumphant, albeit settled, domesticated phenomenon we have called Christendom. And now we live in the time after Christendom, bound to it only by a few lingering habits of thought. Modernity is Christendom’s successor, understanding itself as the

post-Christian age - witness as just one illustration the escalating rejection of an admittedly inadequate religious education programme in schools.

By way of protest at a sometimes real, sometimes imagined, past, Modernity witnesses to an increasingly rapid migration of the image of freedom – a migration from freedom as *the* defining attribute of God to its current usurpation now demanded by human beings - that of a minimally restrained libertarian freedom of the individual will - even if the jury is still out in the face of the much celebrated unlimited possibilities being grasped at.

The point of all this - underscoring our real concern this morning - is for us to understand better that this all-encompassing mantra of personal freedom has come about in the shadow of the history of the epiphany of the Gospel's proclamation. In every modern demand for social and personal recognition as inherent rights, there is a distant echo, however distorted, of Paul's proclamation to the Gentiles of the 'boundless riches of Christ' – that all the powers of the present age have been subdued, and death and futility defeated, not by the law but by a gift that has transcended the law's power over against us.

If this be the case, as it assuredly is, the burning question for us remains. How might epiphany be a reality in our world today?

Firstly, we might cheer ourselves up more than a little by learning to grow into the realisation that modern Western atheism, whether held as an ideology, or more commonly, simply as a practical life style – that proliferating atheism is chiefly a Christian heresy, and *could not have arisen in a non-Christian setting*. This means that we can confidently conclude that the historical force ultimately most destructive of a fading Christian culture of the West will prove to be not principally atheism, or materialism, or capitalism or whatever. It is, and will increasingly demonstrate itself to be simply *the unrecognised outcome of authentic Christian faith itself*.

What then of such a promising realisation? It is in this fragmenting world that we are being forced to inhabit that a belief in providence must be seen to be uniquely precious – that is to say, that the tale of Christendom's failure and defeat is enfolded within the larger workings of grace. Perhaps all that is being left to us is to hold to a trust in divine providence as one of the more subdued and unheroic, but equally indispensable, expressions of faith - that the gift of waiting is a *charism* peculiarly suited to our day.

And this is why Epiphany is, by necessity - essentially - always and everywhere - a prospect *not* anticipated by the prevailing culture. That epiphany of release from Babylonian darkness was certainly before Isaiah in his own day. His is a text for us today, too, enmeshed as the world is in its domestic and trans-national gloom of escalating contemporary Babylonian captivities – always, of course, dressed up as liberation.

For in truth Isaiah has got there first:

“For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples - but, - and this ‘but’ past history has more than once encouragingly, and surprisingly, demonstrated: but the Lord shall arise....”
