

## THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS

I reckon that it's the hymns that best capture the atmosphere and meaning of Epiphany:

“O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness  
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim”.

Worship is at the very heart of this Festival. As soon as the Wise Men arrived at their destination they prostrated themselves before Mary's child, and offered their gifts. Whatever else, they are worshippers.

“With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness  
Kneel and adore him, the Lord is his Name.”

Of course worship is a universal instinct. It's as fundamental to human nature as breathing. “Everybody worships”, writes John Foster Wallace, “the only choice we get is what to worship. If you worship money and things, then you will never have enough. Worship your own body and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid and will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They're the kind of worship you gradually slip into, without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the world will not discourage you because the world of money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self.”

I reckon that's a pretty accurate description of how things are with us. Which is why we need Epiphany. If we are not going to be sucked into the various forms of unconscious worship that our society encourages, then we need to be clear about who we are worshipping and why. If we worship the Living God we will tend to become like him. We will fulfil our human destiny. The Wise Men knew this. They were

determined to offer their gifts to the One who had been revealed to them as their King.

What counts is that God has disclosed himself to us. We don't invent God to satisfy our projections or our prejudices. The nature of the God we worship is not determined by us, it is revealed by Him. God is like Jesus. Jesus reveals God in terms of flesh and blood. His compassion, his care for those who are weak and vulnerable, his patience, his challenge to the proud and self-satisfied, his readiness to forgive, all these are characteristics of God himself. But of course, God's nature of vulnerable, suffering Love, is supremely revealed through the Cross, and his power to work through death to create new life is demonstrated above all in the Resurrection. God shows us how he eternally is, and how he eternally is, is how he is continually working within us and within our world to accomplish his purposes of love.

And it is this God who has reached out by his grace to take you and me by the hand and make us his own. He calls us into relationship with himself, and lives within us by his grace, transforming our fallible human natures to make us more and more fully the people we are intended to be.

So if this is how God is, how can we not offer him our worship? The more we become aware of how God is towards us, how much he loves us, the deeper will be our response to him, and the more we will want to give the whole of ourselves to him in our worship. Because, make no mistake, true worship of God is costly. There's a story told of Archbishop William Temple, who was conducting a mission to the University of Oxford. At the conclusion of his address, the packed congregation was lustily singing the hymn 'When I survey the wondrous Cross'. After the third verse the Archbishop called for a pause. He asked everyone to read the final verse carefully.

'Where the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all'

He said to the assembled multitude, “If you feel you cannot sing those words with conviction, please remain silent. If you feel you are able to affirm them in complete confidence, continue to sing loudly. But if, in all honesty, you are not yet able fully to give your all to God, but long to be able to give more of yourself to Him, then just whisper. And when they resumed, the church was filled with the sound of everyone in the congregation whispering the final verse. The fact is that God’s love should demand everything we have to give, our soul, our life, our all, but fallible human beings as we are, we can, as yet, only give a part of ourselves in our worship. We long to be able to give more and pray that in the power of the Spirit, we may do so more and more each day.

Thankfully, we are not alone. We worship as a community, supported by one another in our strengths and our weaknesses. And of course, as we worship we are united with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven. So we are continually upheld and supported in our offering, inadequate as it is. St Matthew, of course, never specifies how many Wise Men there were, and the traditional number of three comes from the number of the gifts that they presented. But however many there were, and at one time the Eastern Church believed there were as many as 16, the offering they made was a corporate one, just as we come together as a community to make our offering today. We need one another’s gifts, one another’s support, one another’s encouragement, as we respond to the challenges and opportunities of Christian life and service.

The quality of Epiphany that I value most is a vision of worship that is transcendent and mysterious. We are urged to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, and to proclaim his glory. There have been moments in my life when I have experienced a little bit of glory, and have been swept away by something akin to the beauty of holiness, but, if I am honest, most of the time worship feels fairly mundane and routine. I guess you probably feel the same. It takes perseverance to ensure that we are offering the best that we are able, and spiritual imagination to trust the glory and the majesty that lie behind our somewhat limited efforts, as we sing the familiar hymns and say the familiar prayers. Epiphany reminds us what really lies behind our outward rituals as Sunday by Sunday we join with angels and archangels in offering praise and thanksgiving to the One who has revealed his glory in his Son’s dying and

rising, and who has raised our human nature to his right hand. Believe it or not, together this-morning we are participating in the glory of heaven. When you receive the bread and the wine, Christ comes to birth within you, but he also raises you up to the throne of the Godhead. Every Communion is a kind of ascension in which together we are lifted up to participate in the beauty of holiness.

In the heavenly country bright  
need they no created light.  
thou its light, its joy, its crown  
thou its sun which goes not down;  
there for ever may we sing  
alleluias to our King.