

Epiphany: You Can't Go Home Again

Were we led all this way for Birth or Death? This was a Birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different...I should be glad of another death. —"Journey of the Magi," by T.S. Eliot

God is shining forth in the most unwanted and unsuspected places: the material and even vulnerable world.

The Magi set out on a trip that would change them forever. Each of us is challenged to do the same.

By Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

An epiphany is not an idea. As D. H. Lawrence said, people can do anything they want with an idea, but a truly new experience changes everything. Before you can do anything with it, it does something with you!

Most of us prefer ideas and words; we are afraid of any authentically new experience. Unlike the Magi, we do not tend to allow stars to divert us to a new and unknown place. Most of us stay inside our private castles and avoid such questionable adventures. Yes, we avoid death supposedly, but we also avoid birth. We miss out on the great epiphany.

An epiphany is not an experience that we can create from within, but one that we can only be open to and receive from another. Epiphanies leave us totally out of control, and they always demand that we change. We would rather have objectified religion, which leaves us potentially in control and never having to change at all

Religion without epiphanies becomes digging in your heels; religion with epiphanies becomes living on your heels, ready to go wherever God manifests. One wonders if the three kings ever went back home at all. Home base had been taken from them.

The feast of the Epiphany tells us that from the very beginning Jesus was someone to be personally experienced, and not just mentally agreed upon, proven, accepted or argued about. The categories are entirely different: True human experience demands that the whole person be present and active. In that light, one wonders how many people really experience things since we are hardly ever present to experience our own experiences.

If you are like me, you are usually somewhere else than here. God wants more than our mind, it seems. As Jesus put it, we are to give God our whole mind, our whole heart, our whole soul and our whole strength (see Mark 12:29-30). In other words, we offer not just our assent to proper ideas about God, but our very selves as persons. It's love rather than mere duty; surrender and trust rather than mere obedience.

The Magi bring themselves and their assumptions on a perilous journey, and only then can they offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And it all leads to an encounter that rearranges their lives, their self-images and seemingly even their pocketbooks.

They enter another group and religion from their own, they trust their own skills as astrologers (and God uses their secular profession to bring them to God!), they interrupt their daily regimen at great length and, if they were kings, they submitted to another one! It's all quite extraordinary imagery and lesson, one might even say very un-religious kind of practice.

Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) makes very clear in the first chapter that God is primarily revealing not ideas, dogmas, moralities, but God's very self: "It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself" (#2). Biblical revelation is a personal category of encounter, a biblical knowing, not just a classroom study. It is transformation more than just education.

This is very different from mere revelation of ideas. In fact, it implies that experience is the very condition for revelation even to happen! We are involved in a personal encounter in the Bible. Vulnerability is therefore much more important than mere intelligence. As Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, put it, all real living is meeting.

It is fairly easy to discuss and have opinions; it is much harder to be present to another and to meet them. The first allows us to maintain ourselves as we are; the second demands surrender and getting ourselves out of the way. The first is the nature of the ego; the second is the nature of the Spirit.

Ideas can be weighed, proven and dismissed, but how do you know if you carry the encountered spirit of another? How do you know if the God encounter has rubbed off on you, or if it was an authentic God encounter at all? The fact is, you never do know. You only seek, hope, trust and seek again, which is probably why most of us prefer words to faith. That's exactly why the Word became flesh.

This is probably why Jesus' only category for judging persons is by what comes out of them (see Mark 7:20). Jesus never seems to judge people by the mere words they say, or even by what group they belong to, but by the very quality of their being, their spirit. Holiness refers to the who that is acting more than the what that they do. One can tell the difference when it is Jesus who is acting, and when it is merely defensive ego.

No surprise that we often settle instead for the apostles' tribal mentality (see Mark 9:38), or for the moralisms of the scribes and Pharisees (see Mark 7:5). Language and group symbols we can control. Ideas we can police. The spirit of another only God knows. Epiphanies we have to wait for, discern, trust and honor. The word became flesh but, to be honest, we would rather just have the word.

'Bread Seeking Power'

An epiphany is a flashing-out, a showing-forth, a sudden appearance, a manifestation not of something necessarily new, but of something that was up to now avoidable. In Jesus the showing has become historically tangible, touchable and undeniable. The Logos that was the prototype for all things had to become a living and visible image in time.

We celebrate this mystery on the 12th day of Christmas (now in many countries on the second Sunday after Christmas) and we call it the Epiphany, or manifestation. There is still the memory of the time when the entire Church year and its major feasts were solemnly proclaimed and sung as an announcement on this day. Although again encouraged, this ancient ritual has unfortunately fallen out of practice.

The feast of the Epiphany was for centuries used as a momentary flash picture of the entire mystery of God's Incarnation. It warned us ahead of time that it would lead to Good Friday, but also Easter, Pentecost and multitudinous feasts. We were being prepared, forewarned and called forth to experience!

Unless we are awakened, told to expect, spiritually aroused, we hardly ever do. We are instead on cruise control, daily business as usual. Without an authentic spirituality, most lives are a collective sleepwalking, and sometimes even in the name of religion itself. Epiphanies, thank God, wake us up so we can in fact experience our experiences, learn from them and be transformed by them. This is the journey of holiness.

What we celebrate in the mystery of the Epiphany is not that we are right, that we have God in our pocket, or that our religion is best. Instead we celebrate that God is apparent, God has humanity in God's pocket and God-in-Jesus is utterly given, trustworthy and better than we ever imagined. It is God who is manifest, not our formulations of God!

What we have in the Bethlehem manifestation is shockingly simple. A child held forth—no theologies, mandates or formulations to be agreed upon or denied; no proven divinity, only human vulnerability and embarrassing poverty; no credentials or authority to validate those astrologers, only their own experience of how stars operate.

Again, the Magi had to do that most dangerous of things: trust and follow their own limited experience. Which is all that any of us has! And God seems humble enough to use it in our favor, even if it might be pagan or initially wrong.

The mystery of the Epiphany is saying that God is perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed in the same physical place! God is shining forth in the most unwanted and unsuspected of places: the material and even vulnerable world. Here God is no longer dangerous, threatening or brandishing punishments, but, believe it or not, a helpless baby! I cannot think of any other religion which puts God in such a compromised position.

What happened to Omnipotens Deus? Suddenly, as Augustine put it, “Christ is the bread seeking hunger.” History had always thought that we were the food for God. History had always thought that we were the helpless children and God the parent. The surprise was so shocking that, after 2,000 years of the manifestation, we have only been able to paint it and experience it, but hardly ever formulate it in acceptable words.

That’s why so very many saints, like our own St. Anthony, are so often pictured holding the baby Jesus. It could not have happened historically, but we had to paint it because we are still trying to comprehend the impossible mystery of a God who is weak instead of strong. Religion is effectively turned on its head in such imagery. Those baby Jesus images remained in our psyche for a necessary reason. To appreciate the image, we must examine the previous history.

'Do Not Be Afraid'

God, I am sorry to say, has not been a very likable figure in most of human history. This is so consistently true that it is seldom talked about. The violent and almost sadistic character of God was taken for granted until history changed by a new manifestation, a showing-forth that began with the Jewish consciousness of their God, and reached its fulfillment in Jesus, who took his own Jewish tradition to its full and logical conclusion. We have come to take a warm and inviting God for granted ever since Jesus—so for granted, some might say, that we are no longer overcome by a wondrous confidence and gratitude.

The Romans said that the corruption of the best is the worst, and maybe that explains why Christianity can be both amazingly transformative and embarrassingly trivial and trite when it dares to speak of God. It all depends on if you have undergone the necessary epiphany. In this case, the Epiphany humbles you to the core, and makes you fall in love with God forever.

All of the epiphanies in the Bible invariably begin with the exact same words, “Do not be afraid.” That’s because people have always been afraid of God! God was never someone that people sought after for God’s own sake. God was not someone whose presence you relished or whose judgments you liked. You kept your distance, out of God’s way if possible, and looking for any way to appease this capricious and always demanding deity.

Religious history is a history of human sacrifice, animal sacrifice and many disguised attempts at self-flagellation. It’s not a love affair (except among the mystics of all religions!), but usually a cautious standoff accompanied by ritual attempts to placate a distant and demanding God. This is so embedded into the human hardwiring now that it is very hard to eradicate.

After 30 years as a preacher, I know that my best attempts to preach good news often result in another trumped-up form of bad news for people. We cannot imagine it any other way, which is exactly why God had to give us a new image! Most people seem programmed not to enjoy God, and they fight you just the way the scribes and Pharisees fought Jesus every step of the way. Love is always about giving up control, and people are trained to think of taking control—even of God. In my experience, most people would sooner be afraid and in control than in love and out of control.

The Paschal Mystery

As T. S. Eliot says later in the same poem quoted above: “We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.” We keep returning to our longtime practice of fear and appeasement, but somehow it does not really work anymore.

History has been askew ever since Jesus. We are on a tilt since history heard about the Incarnation, and we cannot easily find our new balance. I think the gospel leaves us deliberately off-balance, so we have to stay on that same astrologer’s journey, seeking a star outside of our own little kingdoms. Be careful not to rebalance yourself too quickly, or you will probably miss the transformative power of the Good News.

The precise nature of that tilt, that skewed sense of what is up and what is down, what is success and what is failure, is called the paschal mystery. As we Catholics say at the heart of the eucharistic prayer, it is “the mystery of faith.”

It is the most disguised place where God is both perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed. It is the final and most transformative epiphany, and takes paradox to its highest stress point: Life and death are two sides of the same reality,

and they cannot be separated. You cannot have one without the other. God is in both places—and at the same time! Probably that is why the paschal mystery is the real theme of every single Eucharist. We would not get it or believe it any other way.

T. S. Eliot says it so well in his poem: “I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different”! So we continue to say it as a ritual acclamation, and do not always understand how practical and truthful it actually is.

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” That is the cosmic way that religion talks, although it does not always translate to the contemporary psychological mind. For far too many people it remains a mere liturgical acclamation, but with no practical meaning.

The *mysterium fidei*, however, dares to define reality correctly and honestly, against all philosophies of progress, fatalism and gnostic enlightenment. It says truthfully that the only reality available to us is inherently glorious and inherently tragic. To trust and live that reality, to find God in both sides of everything, is to live the agony and ecstasy of God.

Reality itself converts us. Or as my friend Paula D’Arcy puts it, “God comes to you disguised as your life.” You cannot imagine a more universal, available and non-elitist spirituality. No wonder Jesus rightly and proudly told us to preach this gospel to all the nations. It is by nature non-exclusionary and creative of community. It is indeed very good news.

It does not create group superiority or scapegoating. It only transforms and enlightens. It invites everybody to transformation and also challenges every attempt to put us back in charge. Now reality itself is in charge, and reality, or what I like to call the actual, is the primary revelation place of God.

Our word for this, of course, is incarnation. No wonder that we associate the mystery of Epiphany with Bethlehem itself. If you get incarnation right, passion, death and resurrection all follow in predictable sequence. I don’t exactly know why, but I know they do. Now we can suspect why, in the old liturgy, they announced the whole Church year on January 6. Get this first epiphany right, God perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed in the actual, and all the rest of the year will not surprise or disappoint you.

If God can be manifest in a baby in a poor stable for the unwanted, then we better be ready for God just about anywhere and in anybody. The letting-go of any attempt to compartmentalize God will always feel dangerous and maybe even like dying. As Eliot says, “I should be glad of another death.” What looks like birth is also and always death in this mystery of faith. And what looks like death, thanks to God, is promised as birth.

That explains the foundational optimism of authentic Christianity, and the deep joy of authentic Christians. They are indestructible people.

In the incarnational worldview, matter and Spirit were never separate. The world is the Body of Christ and Spirit is hidden in material reality, just as in the prototypical Jesus. The world itself is the hiding place and the revelation place of God. The actual is what leads us to God. We now have the ability to find God in all things, even the sinful, the broken, the painful and the tragic. It creates a very restful and joy-filled religion, where the primary attitudes are confidence and gratitude, but not without suffering.

This news is normally shocking and disappointing to people who like religion for its own sake. Yet this alone deserves to be called Good News, a true epiphany, the great surprise of God. All else is both bad and old. Ironically, it differs from the traditional worldview only insofar as now there is no need for fear or technique. It is based in joy and the primal goodness of Genesis, while being totally honest about its necessary tragic side. But the great difference is that God uses everything to get at us, even our mistakes. That is unlike any other teaching. You will know salvation through the forgiveness of your sin, according to the great Benedictus hymn in Luke (see 1:77).

No people in their right minds would reject such an epiphany. Incarnational Christianity is beyond the boundaries of anybody’s ability to control it. It is good news for anybody, transformation for everybody and bad news for nobody except those who want to divide and conquer. It is a challenge to every culture and every religion. It is the ground for all social justice, human dignity and actually a much more demanding morality.

And it is both the ground and the goal of all mystical experience. Now God is in all things. We can no longer separate, exclude or avoid anybody or anything, especially under the guise of religion. We all, like the Magi, must now kneel and kiss the ground, throwing our own kingships to the wind.

The Epiphany we celebrate is Incarnation itself, the Incarnation of God in Christ, which allows us to see God's image and incarnation everywhere else too. Paul is pure poetry and song when he writes about this mystery in Colossians 1:15-17: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth.... [A]nd in him all things hold together." Our Christ is the magnificent showing forth of what has always been happening, but what we were afraid or unable to see. John Duns Scotus and the Franciscan school called this the doctrine of the primacy of Christ: The mind of God first created a prototype, Jesus—and what God did there perfectly, he used as a model for the rest of creation.

Get Jesus right, and all the rest makes sense, even if it is often still painful. Such a colossal Christ is indeed the savior of the world, but not in an imperialistic or exclusionary way—because that is not how epiphanies work. Epiphanies just manifest the mysteries that are always beyond words.

Afterwards, we are out of control, going back home by a different route, yet realigned correctly with what-is. Reality is still the best ally of God, and God always comes disguised as our life.

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