

Unexpected Appearances

Matthew 1:1-12

Have you ever tried to see in the dark? Maybe outside at night, no torch, no light from your smart phone, so you can pick up broad outlines, but you can't make out much detail. Or maybe you're looking out through a window at night, and can't really see much outside. If there's someone out there, you're having trouble working out who it is. And then you turn on the outside light, and suddenly everything is revealed. (There's no one there after all, just the bushes blowing in the wind.)

The Apostle Paul once said that when we try to understand God, it's like looking through that dark or frosted glass. When we try to understand God's ways, it can often feel like we are entering a dark cloud of mystery. We can't make out the details. We need God to turn on the light, to reveal himself to us. We'd like him, as it were, to make an appearance.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this, for an appearance, or for something being revealed. Their word was 'Epiphany', a revelation. We might even use the word today — "I've had an epiphany", meaning I've just had a flash of insight, something has been revealed to me, I've understood the basic nature of something, or some essential truth. We say the light dawned — something was illuminated and made clear.

And in the church year, this is the season of Epiphany, the time when we celebrate God revealing something of his nature, something of his purpose in this newborn Christ-child. Throwing a little light on the scene.

Now, in the early church, this was a cause for great celebration. It was a feast day second only to Easter in importance. And the third great festival was Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Do you know that nobody even thought much about celebrating Christmas until the fourth century? For those first 400 years, the big three were the festivals of redemption, of revelation, and of the in-dwelling Spirit..

In Germany and some other countries, there are still Epiphany celebrations where the people dress up; but in Australia, these days we tend to let Epiphany kind of slide by. We see the pictures on the Christmas cards of those wise men bringing their gifts, and think nothing more of it. We're rather missing the importance, and certainly, it has no shock value. But for a proudly righteous Jew in the first century, this revelation was completely unexpected, something that really got their hackles up, for several reasons: firstly, who got the message; secondly, where those people came from; and thirdly, what they did about it.

The first reason was who came looking for the child. They're called Magi, which could have a range of meanings:

- The least provocative meaning was wise men, people with supernatural knowledge and abilities that comes from reading the stars or other forms of divination — things no devout Jew would have anything to do with.
- The magi might also mean the priests of the religions of Babylon, the ones who spoke the sacred words at pagan sacrifices.
- At worst, the magi might mean magicians or sorcerers, or just plain straight-out deceivers.

No devout Jew would have anything to do with such people — those kinds of activities were repeatedly condemned and prohibited throughout the Scriptures. How could God possibly allow any part of his revelation to come to, or through, such people?

The second reason that upset the first century Jews was where these magi came from. They came to Jerusalem from the East, probably from modern-day Iraq or somewhere close by. Not exactly a popular Jewish holiday destination. Every first-century Hebrew knew that Israel was God's chosen holy land, and that his eternal flame burned in the temple in Jerusalem. Men riding in from the East? — probably terrorists.

The story makes it clear that the local religious experts have no idea that the Christ has arrived, even though the Scriptures gave clear directions about where to look. So the third upsetting thing is that, unlike our holy men, these suspicious strangers have a pretty clear idea who this baby Jesus really is, and how he should be honoured. They are asking for "God's anointed one", the chosen king. And those gifts that they're bringing operate on two levels:

- Firstly, they fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah about the gifts to be brought from foreign places to honour God's chosen King
- Secondly, each gift is a symbol about who Jesus is, and what lies ahead of him.
 - Gold is a rare and priceless gift given to a king.
 - Frankincense is the gift offered to God, a fragrant marker of the presence of God in our midst.
 - Myrrh has three uses: it's a spice added to oil when anointing a priest; it's also a pain killer; and it's used as a spice to embalm dead bodies.

So Matthew's description of their gifts is a clear announcement: this is a king, the supreme ruler of the world; he is also God with us, to save us from our sins just as the angel told Joseph; and finally he is God's suffering servant, who will face pain and death in bringing the light of God's love into the world.

And this love — God's love — respects none of our boundaries. Luke's story of the shepherds tells us that the good news is more likely to be recognised by the poor and outcast than the respectable and religious. Matthew goes further — Matthew wants to make sure that we know that the good news has broken the bounds of Israel too.

For us, this is wonderful news — Christ is not just king of the Jews, but king of all of us Gentiles as well. He is God with all of us, not just the tribes of Judah. He redeems the world, an offering to all its peoples. And most radical of all, he is our God of love, as Jesus commanded: love for God, for self, for neighbour, for stranger, for alien, for outsider, for outcast, and even for enemy, as he himself modelled on the Cross.

So there are excellent reasons for this to be a festival of massive rejoicing. God is for us, at our side, loving and redeeming you and me. But the Epiphany festivals of the early church had another purpose as well — they were to remind us all that God is revealed miraculously to us in places and in ways that we don't expect. He chose social outcasts like shepherds, and foreigners and magi, to shine a revealing light on Jesus and spread the news about him. God seems to thrive on unexpected appearances.

But God is also love, gentle and kind; beckoning, not forcing. We need to have a willing spirit, and to be looking for him with a loving spirit. And *remembering*, always remembering Epiphany, the revelation. Because God is *here* to be encountered — beside us in the pews, in the sacrament of Communion, in the Scripture reading, in the offering. From the songs we sing to the prayers we pray to the sermons that are preached, the ultimate purpose of all of it is to provide a place where

it is easier for people to experience the epiphany, the self-revelation of God... a time that is structured in such a way as to encourage us to open our eyes and see the God who is here in our midst. So, be alert. And remember, God is very likely to break our boundaries — and ask us to do the same.

As we wend our way from Epiphany through the Lenten season to Easter, let us allow God to reveal himself in our lives. Make space in our lives to have a real encounter with God. It might be here; it might be anywhere... but we can expect that it will happen. Get up in the morning wondering where it will come, and go to sleep listening for God's voice. Read our Bibles expecting to hear God, and come to Communion open to receive. God will reveal himself in Jesus. He has promised. Amen.