EPIPHANIES 10 JANUARY 2016

Manifested by the star…manifest in Jordan’s stream…manifest in power divine/changing water into wine. These lines from Christopher Wordsworth’s hymn, ‘Songs of thankfulness and praise’, give us the clue to the traditional stories of epiphany: Wise Men, the Baptism of Christ and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee.

In the baptism we have high drama. God speaks from heaven: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ What bigger revelation could you have than that? The voice of God booming from the sky? But was the voice heard by everyone present or only by Jesus himself? Was it a blockbuster event or a personal, vocational experience, a bit like Paul’s vision on the Road to Damascus? We might be inclined to think that epiphanies ought to be in the former category, like the deus ex machina of the Greek dramatists, when an actor playing a god is let down onto the stage by crane to resolve an *impasse* in the story.

The Baptism has a literary feel to it, like the appearance of Banquo’s ghost in Macbeth or Hamlet’s father’s ghost. Or like a religious painting in which godly revelation beams down through the clouds in a cascade of sunlight. Are epiphanies generally like that? I don’t think so. Aren’t they more subtle, creeping up on you - moments when things fall into place? Eureka moments, but moments that come not entirely unexpectedly, because you’ve been mulling over a problem for a long time.

Karl Barth and Hans Kung, both great theologians, thought God was manifest to them through the music of Mozart. Wordsworth found intimations of something like God in nature. Desmond Tutu found God in truth and reconciliation. But lest all that seems not gritty enough, others have found revelation of God in loss, or pain, or tragedy, or unresolved break up of relationship - the stuff of War and Peace (the novel not the TV programme), King Lear, and Mozart’s Requiem. It’s common to think that many people lose faith when up against some awful suffering, but in fact it’s often the other way round: people finding God in extremis. It’s the great religious insight the playwright, Dennis Potter, unpacked in his last interview when he was dying of cancer. He was talking about how the religion he experienced often seemed not to get anywhere near the places that mattered. And he said ‘for me, religion is the wound, not the bandage’. Or, paraphrased, God is in the wound not in the bandage. It’s not just wrapping things up to be comfortable. When he was Archbishop, Rowan Williams said, ‘I feel that ought to be somewhere on the desk of every clergyperson just as a reminder.’

This week I’ve been reading Oliver Twist. I don’t think I’ve ever read it before, but just assumed I had because I’ve seen it so many times on TV, on film, or in the West End - Oliver the musical; you’ve got to pick a pocket or two. You remember it was originally serialised in the nineteenth century in a monthly paper over a couple of years, and there are lots of fillers as the young Dickens musters the right number of words for the next edition, but there are also lots of brilliant bits. For example, when Nancy visits Miss Rose Maylie to warn her that Fagin and co are out to re-capture Oliver, the gangster’s moll is overawed by Rose’s graciousness and generosity. Looking at Rose is like gazing at a blindingly pure light. Rose offers Nancy a lifeline to escape the dread clutches of the psychopathic Bill Sikes, and as reader you are crying out to her to take it. But she won’t; she doesn’t see herself as worthy; she’s ashamed and can’t accept; she feels morally compelled to go back to Sikes and her fate. This is epiphany. As if some sort of cosmic moral wrong must be rectified and the brutal punishment received.

Contrast this with George Herbert’s poem, Love, when the soul enters the Messianic Banquet.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back

Guilty of dust and sin.

The guilty soul is ashamed to sit down at the dinner, but Christ reassures her and presses God’s free grace upon her

…let my shame

                             Go where it doth deserve. (says the soul)

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

                             So I did sit and eat.

– another kind of epiphany – the recognition that you are accepted.

Here Herbert has taken his inspiration directly from the gospel, from Luke 12:37. ‘Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.’

This was an experience discussed by Paul Tillich (the German/American theologian who died in 1965) in one of his most famous sermons. ‘Sometimes at that moment (in the moment of epiphany or realisation) a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later… Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!’

What would your epiphany be? What experience or event has been for you a revelatory moment? It would be interesting to know.

As I said at the beginning, I don’t personally find the blockbuster approach very helpful; not the sudden blinding light or the overwhelming, irresistible force. I find revelation more in character, exposed through the example of character. So I’d just as likely find epiphany in the great parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son. In the wilderness Jesus refused to turn stones into bread or jump, without injury, from the pinnacle of the Temple. He refused warrior like imagery on Palm Sunday in the procession into Jerusalem. But when he had told the story of the Good Samaritan, he asked those who wanted to learn the secret of his spirituality, ‘Who then was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?’ Faced with that kind of question, the penny drops, the pieces fall into place, and you see, not through the glass darkly, but face to face, just as the Roman centurion, Longinus, did at the foot of the cross.