

THE EPIPHANY - a sermon for Rondebosch United Church - 6 January 2019

When Robert asked if I would like to prepare the message for the 6th of January I was excited to discover that today is the Feast of the Epiphany. In my work as a writer, I rely quite heavily on the experience of the epiphany, so I felt reasonably qualified to do the research and to talk about “epiphany” and how it works in our lives.

I thought immediately about the way we use that word in everyday speech: Eureka! I’ve had an epiphany! I’ve seen the light...

An epiphany is a sudden and striking realisation. You become conscious of how important something is to you - or how unimportant it is. Often the term describes a scientific breakthrough, or the arrival of a new philosophical discourse or a new political dispensation that comes from a bright idea. But for most ordinary people - you and I here - it applies to that enlightening moment, that realisation, when a problem or situation opens up to a deeper perspective, a new reality.

I thought about some of my own epiphanies, which inevitably marked the end of one phase of life and the beginning of the next. Sometimes these were filled with hope excitement: It knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was 15, I played in the school orchestra in the high school I went to in America and I knew I wanted to be an orchestral musician and I wanted to study music, so I went and did that. So... an epiphany can be a really joyful thing, it can be hopeful. It can be that moment when you says I’m going to have a child. I’m ready. Or, we’re going to have a family. Sometimes the revelation was painful: I have seen that a situation is irrevocably flawed and a relationship was over.

A breakthrough like this typically comes after a long struggle, maybe even a “breakdown”. An epiphany frequently signals a life-changing event because we have had an altered perception of ourselves and of the context in which we exist. Somebody, some thing, has shown us a bigger picture and now, we have a way through, or a way out.

An epiphany heralds a shift. Something is about to happen: you suddenly see how it really is and so, you’ve got to get a new job, or you must abandon a project that was never going to work, even though you gave it your best shot. Or, you’re going to start a small business, or there’s a book that demands you to write it. You have to tell that story. There’s nobody else who can tell it. Or, maybe it’s time to move house.

But maybe it's just a small change. Sometimes an epiphany is not that big grand thing. Maybe it's just that you've realised you have to make some kind of shift. Either you realise you have to cut out something that doesn't agree with you and you're going to feel better without it - and you now are ready to do it. You've seen the light and you're going to make that change. Or you're going return to a hobby that once gave you joy but has been squeezed from your busy schedule. Whatever, a journey is about to commence.

What do we know about the festival of the epiphany from a Christian perspective? The homage paid to the Christ child by the three wise travellers who came from other cultures and traditions, signified the universality of Christ's message. Here was a redeemer who could offer salvation to everybody over time. Not just in the moment, not just to his own people. This was a redeemer for every man and woman.

Augustine of Hippo wrote:

We, beloved, of whom the Magi were the first fruits, we are the inheritance of Christ even to the ends of the earth.... Let us so proclaim him on this earth, in this our mortal life, that we may not return the way we have come, nor retrace the footsteps of our former way of life. This is why, too, the Magi did not return the way by which they had come. A change of way meant a change of life.

~ Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Here, in this image, we see the Magi and we see the Christ child naked. Often, an epiphany renders us naked. We see deeply into ourselves something that maybe we did not want to see, or maybe we always suspected or maybe we always knew, but the newness, the nakedness comes to us very clearly. This festival of the Epiphany completes the season of Christmas - so I hope you've all taken down the decorations and put away the Christmas tree - and it heralds the start of Jesus' ministry.

This image of the three travellers coming before Jesus invites us to consider how we are going to respond. Are we going to focus on spreading the message of salvation? And what does salvation mean in this day and age? Because if you go out and start talking to random strangers in the street you've got a good chance of somebody hustling you off to see a doctor. How do we significantly contribute to the salvation of the world? Are we working towards sustainability? Are we integrating families? Are we creating new, important conversations? Are we part of these conversations? And how do we bring our gifts to the Christ child? Do we even know our gifts? Because sometimes there's a sense in which we struggle to own our giftedness. Perhaps our talent is not recognised by others, or we haven't recognised it ourselves. How do we

look at the star, that light which leads us to an inner conversion of our own? And how do we work for that conversion?

This is a question that interests me most, because there is a thread we must follow if we are to complete that inner conversion in our lifetime. Perhaps that's the real work of our lifetime: how do we fully realise the light within ourselves? How do we bring that to Christ?

Like the wise men, if we want a change of way, we may have to undergo a change of life. An epiphany is not a one week wonder. It comes as an answer to a question that will not go away. Often, it's a matter one has wrestled with for months, if not years. Often an epiphany comes after toiling in the dark, in confusion - perhaps in depression - for a long time, perhaps even your lifetime. However, when you discover that truth for which you have yearned, when you see that gift that is yourself that is deep within you, that has the potency and the power to become real. When you see that and you know it, there's often a spaciousness that unfolds inside your body. This is undeniable. You can quite literally feel something unlock; and a weight is shifted.

There is something very, very sweet about that moment of release. After battling to comprehend a matter for a long time with a knot that you cannot untangle - the threads are all stuck together - when you have that unlocking, it's really as if you have a burden you can put down. Maybe you have a stone in your throat is gone and you can speak again. You can hear your own voice. That's an epiphany.

A new insight, is seldom easily arrived at, even though it may be very simple. It might probably demands a sacrifice, or a major overhaul of everything you've ever believed about your life, your family, your community. It might lead to rupture and chaos, but it might also - inevitably does - bring a quiet certitude and with that serenity, a sense of how you're going to manage the chaos, how you're going to walk through the difficult that you now find yourself in because you've had this epiphany. But with that comes serenity and liberation. For me that is part of what redemption means - liberation from the things that keep us stuck and small and scared.

So... where do we find "epiphanies"? How do we arrive at them?

Certainly in some instances the epiphany comes as a dream, or a vision. If you enter in into a time of centering prayer or meditation, or you have a session of yoga, or you walk on the beach for the beach for an hour. As you quiet and listen in to yourself, you have this state of heightened awareness afterward, and while a vision implies an otherworldly

thing, clarity comes and that vision is restored when you can make space to tune in to our own heart.

For some, they hear the truth that unlocks the conundrum in an intense and sustained conversation with a trusted person, like a therapist, who can listen to what's being said and also hears what is not being said. Sometimes it happens in a dialogue with a trusted friend or family member who has your own best interests at heart. If you can believe that this person is committed and willing to help you uncover your own truth about a situation, you can also trust the experience and with this scrambled egg you've got, you can't unscramble the egg, but you can decide whether to make a cake or an omelette. That is the experience of transitioning through a difficulty in connection with somebody who deeply cares about you.

Perhaps writing a journal enables one to get to know their own deepest self, and through that process of writing - not just once! It's daily, it's weekly, it's monthly, an ongoing quest to know who you are, for yourself, that you can find out what's really bothering you and how you want to move through it.

A willingness to engage in the creative life requires for us to listen to our deepest self. In the process of making art or engaging with art, we also make those internal shifts that lead to significant change, and lead to the inner conversion.

The poet, David Whyte, speaks about how when he writes poems, the process of writing the poem, enables him to hear himself saying "*the thing I didn't know I knew...*" And that's the epiphany, when we hear ourselves saying what we didn't know we knew.

Reading poetry is another way of experiencing the divine moving in our life. The poet throws us a line or a verse which seems, unexpectedly, to light up an experience of our own. A word or a stanza suddenly resonates and we are given the gut response that tells us what we already knew.

I love "The Journey of the Magi" by TS Eliot. It's told by one of the kings who tells how difficult the epiphanic journey was. His litany of irritations is a metaphor for any number of creative endeavours that require us to go through hard times - here and now in 2019.

This section:

*There were times we regretted... the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly*

*And the villages dirty and charging high prices
A hard time we had of it,
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly...*

Isn't that the experience too, let's say of a small business owner trying to get his products into Woolworths, or a young physiotherapist serving as an intern in a rural hospital, or an academic who has to finish an essay to publish in a journal - publish or perish! There are these creative endeavours - it's not about putting on a pair of dancing shoes or picking up a violin - there are creative endeavours that happen all day, every day... a school teacher, who's got too many children with too few textbooks to go around and insufficient lavatories, or a single mother trying to raise her children in contemporary South Africa, perhaps in a township where there are these cursing, grumbling runaway taxi men.

The Irish poet and philosopher, John O'Donohue, spoke about the mystery of poetry.

Poetry tries to draw alongside the mystery as it's emerging, he says, and somehow bring it into presence and into birth.

He also said that every one is an artist. By this he means that "*everyone is involved, whether they like it or not in the construction of the world, so it's never as given as it actually looks. You're always shaping it and building it,*" and he feels "*that from that perspective... everyone has an imagination.*"

I want to turn to another poem that speaks about the dailiness of what we have to hold onto as we seek our epiphany, as we seek to see the light. This is a poem by the American poet, William Stafford:

THE WAY IT IS

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt*

*or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

~ William Stafford

We all have a capacity for imagination. John O'Donohue says, "... *the act of living, growing, moving forward in time is a creative act, a work of art.*" He also says, "*We have no idea what will land on the shoreline of morning tomorrow... we are always actively involved in receiving and shaping.*"

We don't know where the star will lead us. We don't fully understand our impulses and motivations to change. We sense emotions and thoughts hiding beneath the surface that perhaps keep us stuck, but that are waiting to break through and break out so that we can become fully human and wholly alive. We want to reach our full potential. We yearn to attain those goals that we saw for ourself, but the journey is arduous and we do lose the way. But our own inner conversion is a daily act of seeking the star that led the wise men - and our own wise self - to Christ. Our own inner conversion call us to hold that thread that connect us to truth and courage and hope. Our inner conversion calls us to believe that Christ welcomes the gifts of our life and is waiting for us to be ready to give them to him.

~ Liesl Jobson