

Epiphany or Should We Say Theophany

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[0 : 00] My background in Anglican liturgy does not prepare me well for speaking about Epiphany, hence the somewhat radical title.

I want to just ask a question before a word of prayer. What it is that we think the word Epiphany actually means.

Is there a common understanding of the word Epiphany in the room? Karen, back row always is a good place to start.

A manifestation, yes. It's a manifestation. Any other thoughts? Yes. It's too early.

It's too early. That's not the meaning. It's revealing, to reveal. To reveal, yes. Indeed. Anything more specific than that?

[1 : 13] Our experiences with the Lord. Well, that's adding something, isn't it? It's adding the Lord to the term.

My point of departure here is that the word Epiphany says nothing whatsoever about God. I mean, Epiphany is illustrated classically by Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol, in which the Epiphanies occurred to Scrooge in a sequence.

And they have nothing necessarily to do with God at all. So, fortunately, in the wisdom of the Anglican liturgy, the occasion is usually referred to as the Epiphany of our Lord.

And as Della has just said, that really is a critical part of the definition. But we normally, it seems to me, at least in my brief 30 years of the Anglican communion, talk about the Epiphany unqualified.

It seems to me that we would be well advised, although I suggest it may be so radical as to cause a split, that Theophany, which explicitly talks about the revelation of God, would seem to be more appropriate.

[2 : 37] It is interesting that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the word Theophany is used more commonly than Epiphany. And, of course, as we'll find out later, they're celebrating something rather different than what we are in our version of the Epiphany of our Lord.

So, just by way of introduction, and hopefully we can continue some of the discussion after we have had a word of prayer. Our Father, of your fullness, we have received grace upon grace.

And we do recognize that in the Epiphany of our Lord, we are brought into the covenant. And we do ask that you will help us as we consider the significance of this feast for our times and in our lives.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Now, I think that it is interesting that there are so many aspects of the Epiphany of our Lord which are included in this wonderful book, the Book of Common Prayer.

And I thought just briefly to mention that there is a prayer before the Offitory, specifically for Epiphany.

[4 : 21] Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven. That prayer, which references the star that guided the Magi, and references the way in which the awareness of the Magi, that Jesus was indeed the King of the Jews, that little prayer just announces for us the significance of the Epiphany season.

Let me say first of all that the Epiphany season follows Advent and Christmas.

Those of you who didn't make it to the 8 o'clock service last week will have heard from Dr. Packer the part one of this particular presentation.

Dr. Packer gave us the historical and theological background to this particular season. But I want to pick up on that, the continuity between Advent and Christmas and Epiphany.

Because as I mentioned at the start, it's not a word that I was ever familiar with in the church in which I was reared. And it's not an occasion which I can recall having ever celebrated before becoming a member of the Anglican Church.

[6 : 02] And what this sequence of events indicates is the nature of the preparation and the fulfillment of the Christmas season.

After considering for the month of Advent, the theophanies which two couples were exposed to, Elizabeth and Zechariah and Mary and Joseph, after their theophanies in Advent, all Jewish people, and the theophany of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, also entirely a community of Jewish people involved, and we come to Epiphany and in come these extraordinary people out of left field.

Now what is the importance of that? They, like us, come in out of left field. In other words, the Gentiles were not part of the project.

Either through Advent or Christmas in any explicit way. Now I know we can understand it as Christians, and we do, and we worship Christ as our Lord through those periods.

But in terms of the text and in terms of the historical development, we were really dealing with a Jewish phenomenon until we get to the Epiphany season.

[7 : 57] And I think that this strikes me as quite profound in terms of how we as a group of non-Jews, or largely non-Jews, come in out of left field into the purposes of God in a very explicit way.

So let me just think for a moment about our version, let us say the Anglican version, of Epiphany of Our Lord, and we'll move on to some other aspects of the Epiphany of Our Lord in the second part of the talk.

Okay. So first of all, as you have told me, Epiphany is literally a manifestation or a sudden appearance, a sudden revelation, and the celebration of Epiphany itself had its origin in the Eastern Church, and possibly because of the vagueness of the definition of Epiphany, I'm suggesting that we should really call the season Theophany and not simply Epiphany.

The Epiphany of Our Lord describes the day and season most adequately. The Theophany, however, means the manifestation of a divine being, and the Epiphany of Our Lord is a manifestation of Christ's glory and divinity, or, more specifically, a manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the form of the Magi.

Let me just read the first verse of Matthew chapter 2 as an introduction to who these Magi were.

[9 : 56] Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.

Herodotus says that they were members of the sacred caste of the Medes, which was a specific subgroup of the Zoroastrian religion.

Their astrology and skill in interpreting dreams were the occasion of their finding Jesus. Next question.

How many Magi were there? Eastern Church thinks 12.

Eastern Church thinks 12. Any other? Christmas cost these three. Any other offers?

[11 : 03] Four. Four? Yeah. Four is another. Seven is a good number two. I don't wish to go into legend here in great detail, but legend does have it that 7,000 Magi set out from Persia and only 1,000 actually arrived safely in Jerusalem to talk to Herod, but that's beyond the brief of what we're looking at here.

But 12 has a certain authority from the early church fathers and of course the argument would be presented that there were three gifts, therefore there were three people, but I'm sure that in the past it was possible for people to share gifts.

Therefore there's no direct biblical authority for the three Magi except in so far as one interprets the Psalms and the prophecies with respect to the arrival of kings at the cradle.

But I think that's more by inference than by direct statement. So as I say in the Eastern Church 12 is favoured.

In the Western Church we say three because of the reference to three gifts. No actual number is given in the scripture. Where did they come from?

[12 : 41] Any thoughts? Persia would seem to be the most probable. There are a number of candidates.

Media, Persia, Assyria, Babylonia. These four are the only territories which had a Marjian priesthood.

That the Marjian priesthood being the caste within Zoroastrian religion. If we take the distant Persia as the most likely origin, we're looking at approximately 15 to 1,800 kilometers of travel across the Syrian desert, across the Persian deserts, the Dashti Lut, Dashti Kabir, which are two of the harshest deserts to cross, traveling through Damascus, crossing the ford over the river Jordan near Jericho.

This could have taken between three months and twelve months to do, depending on how they were provisioned. And this is a very interesting thing I'm inferring here, not the actual statement of scripture.

But the next verse in Matthew chapter 2 states, Where is he who was born king of the Jews? The question the Magi posed to Herod.

[14 : 24] For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. So if it was three months, at minimum, and a whole year as possible, they were looking at arriving in Jerusalem and subsequently Bethlehem, a long time after the star itself arose, and presumably the time when Jesus was actually born.

This has some significance in terms of seeing the relationship between Jesus' presentation in the temple, which Luke describes, and it does look as if the presentation in the temple would have occurred then before the Magi arrived, and that Jesus would have been a little bit older than just a very small baby.

there is some confirmation of this in the history of art, not that again one wants to regard this as authoritative, but the way in which the arrival of the Magi and their presentations and their worshipping of Christ are depicted, in many cases show Jesus as being a toddler rather than the baby in arms.

and it may be that they had reasoned that this relationship was the appropriate age by which time the Magi had come.

So, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Magi actually saw the star in the east at the time of his birth. That's the implication of that verse in Matthew.

[16 : 29] they set out at the time that Jesus was born and traveled, let's say, from Persia to Jerusalem.

And then shortly after the birth of Jesus, the baby was presented in the temple, and it was at that time that Simeon and Anna welcomed the promised Messiah.

then followed the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem and reported to Herod that they had seen a star and had come to worship the future king.

Herod panicked, but his priests gave instructions on how and where they were to find him, because, of course, they had got the verse from Micah chapter 5, verse 2, readily at hand to show that indeed Jesus, the king of the Jews, would be born in Bethlehem.

The Magi adored the child as God and offered him gold, frankincense, and myrrh, as we know, there's a personal distraction at this point.

[17 : 57] One of my most famous moments as a little boy was being part of the nativity scene, and I realize now it was a little bit off base, but my most tragic memory is forgetting the one word that I was supposed to say.

There's awful silence in the room. Everybody turned to me and said, and I still didn't catch it. So, it's important to repeat, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There's some division, or some variety of interpretation as to what the significance of these three gifts would be. I think gold for kingship is undisputed, and incense as a symbol of deity, and myrrh, a sacrifice to prepare for the burial of Christ, is a common interpretation.

Indeed, in what is otherwise a seriously flawed hymn, we three kings from Orient are, which has two mistakes in the first line, but does have in the verse king and God and sacrifice, as a very, I think, very appropriate interpretation of the significance of these three gifts.

And as we know, the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned home some other way. The other way may well have been south through Virsheba, and then on through Moab, again, quite a hostile journey across deserts, and a massive undertaking.

[20 : 10] No sooner were the Magi departed than the angel bad Joseph to take Mary and Joseph into Egypt, where they stayed for two years until Jesus was almost three years of age.

Herod, of course, was upset at the failure of the Magi to return to his office, and proceeded with the slaughter of the innocents.

All boys of two years of age and under were slaughtered. Reasons for murdering such a large number included that there needed to be a safe estimate of the time taken on the journey, and allowing for incorrect estimates of the time when the star first appeared.

So, in other words, the decision to include this whole range from zero to two was hopefully going to cover all possible errors, both in the predictions of the astrologers, the Magi, and also the estimate of the time taken.

When the Holy Family returned from Egypt to Galilee, a new Herod had succeeded, and all was well. So, this is the account that is celebrated in our Anglican tradition, and it has huge significance in terms of the way in which it brings non-Jewish people into the fold.

[21 : 47] And I think that that's emphasized then in the following treatment of the collects that we have during the Epiphany season.

How many collects are there in the Epiphany of our Lord's season? Next question. There are so many experts in this room, I cannot believe that this one has flawed you.

Well, there are indeed, as was whispered from the back row, six collects in the Epiphany season. And they're quite remarkable, as is underlined in this wonderful purple-colored book on the collects of Thomas Cranmer.

The first of these collects emphasizes the prayer for the power to know and to do God's will. Those of you who were not constrained by staying in bed this morning will already have heard this collect, the power to know and to do God's will.

The second one is a prayer for peace, both spiritual and temporal. The third one is a prayer for protection against dangers from without.

[23 : 19] The fourth one is a prayer for protection against dangers from within. The fifth one is a general prayer for the protection of the Church of God.

And the sixth one is a prayer for purity in conformity with the revealed character of Christ. Christ. So, if in fact we do read these collects in the next few weeks, we might find it helpful just to think of them as a group and the way in which this comprehensive set of prayers encompasses this whole reality of the bringing in of the Church grafted onto the old covenant and the way in which each of these components of our collects reinforces the lesson of epiphany and the epiphany of our Lord.

And indeed, if I might humbly say so, it reinforces the idea that it might be called a theophany in the sense that each of these is a very direct prayer for God's guidance in the Church not just through this period but of course at other times also.

Now, we have these prayers and we have these collects, we also have a number of readings from the Scripture which reinforce the importance of epiphany and from our particular perspective, the story of the Magi becomes particularly central and important.

but if we look at the traditions that have prevailed both in the Eastern Churches and at times in the Western Church, there are many different epiphanies or theophanies that are celebrated, especially Jesus' baptism when God spoke, in the book, this is my well-beloved son.

[25 : 35] Also in the miracle at Cana, where the changing of the water into wine was a manifestation of God's presence in Christ himself.

also, of course, the nativity itself is another theophany, and then the visit of the Magi.

These are the four primary ways in which the theophanies are celebrated in the Church in general.

The baptism of Jesus was the favored theophany for the Eastern Church, and was well established by the middle of the fourth century.

But the Western Church laid greater and greater emphasis on the manifestation to the Magi. And so we represent a second order tradition, if you like.

[26 : 42] And this is, I mean, there's no fundamental theological issue here. They're both clearly very much manifestations of God's presence amongst us.

And I suppose that the celebration of the baptism of Jesus is a very direct and spectacular example of theophany, but no less spectacular is this remarkable journey of the Magi.

If you look into the various traditions, there's a confusion that enters into the discussion with respect to the celebration of the nativity and the baptism and the presence of the Magi.

The part of the confusion derives from the confusion between the Julian calendar and the Gregorian calendar. And as you probably know, it was not until 1752 that there was the change in calendar.

and this meant a transposition by 13 days of the various dates. So this meant that if you carried on using the Julian calendar, which many of the Eastern churches continue to do, although it's less and less common, there's a difference of 13 days.

[28 : 21] And so, for example, the 19th of January is celebrated in the Eastern Church as 13 days after the 6th of January.

So in other words, they are looking at the arrival of the Magi on the 19th of January simply because of this change in the calendar. It's an interesting thing.

I happened to look into, well, I didn't know that David was going to introduce me, but this Welsh tradition raises its head again. Not so well in this case, but nevertheless, it seems well into the middle of the 19th century, the Welsh tradition continued to be celebrating the Julian calendar, and that in effect there was still, in the mid-19th century, a recognition of that festival in the Welsh Church.

I can't vouch for this, I wasn't around at the time, but that is what I have read and tried to avoid the gossip in the history.

So as you know, Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January the 7th, and their Christmas Eve is January the 6th. and the official explanation is that the majority of Orthodox Christians used the Julian calendar and have in many cases still not adopted the Gregorian calendar.

[30 : 04] And if you calculate it carefully, you'll note that December the 25th actually then falls on January the 7th in the Julian calendar, and that accounts for the difference.

I suppose the difference between the Eastern and the Western tradition is that the Eastern tradition has a greater focus on the incarnation of Christ and the cosmic salvation that he brought God and the mystery of God becoming man, and that that is the key celebration in that Eastern tradition, whereas the emphasis that we have with respect to the Magi is the bringing in of the non-Jewish world into the covenant.

there is a specific emphasis on the shining forth and the revelation of Jesus Christ as Messiah, and the second person of the Trinity at the time of the baptism.

The Eastern Church also celebrates this particularly because, according to tradition, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist marked one of only two occasions when all three persons of the Holy Trinity manifested themselves to the world.

God the Father by speaking through the clouds, God the Son being baptized in the river, and God the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending from heaven. So you see that that particular tradition is quite consistent with what one knows about the Eastern Orthodox Church.

[32 : 05] I don't know how many of you have actually worshipped in an Eastern Orthodox Church. Can you any other? One, two, three? Okay. Not the majority.

In those Eastern Orthodox churches that I have attended, there has been an enormous sense of mystery, enormous sense of beauty, enormous sense of the majesty of God, but very little in the way of teaching, very little in the way of explicit sermonizing.

So I suppose one could infer from the fact that one emphasizes the baptism of our Lord that that is really quite consistent with the sort of emphasis in the Eastern tradition.

And the fact that we tend to be, as David put it, talkers, might make the Magi tradition more probable.

But I do think that it's interesting to recognize that these are theophanies that are just as God given and just as God centered, but there are different events and different reasons for the celebration.

[33 : 33] In the Church of England, which some of you know about, the eve of the Feast of Epiphany is celebrated as Twelfth Night. And the Monday after Epiphany is known as Plough Monday.

Why? Another question. Why in the world would Plough Monday follow Twelfth Night?

No, you don't need to imagine what people do on Twelfth Night. well, sorry? Was that a no, that's just a that's just a hump.

Well, it's apparently it tells you something about the severity of the English winter. It was the start of the agricultural year. So, you stick the plough in the soil after the Twelfth Night.

I don't think anybody in Edmonton would find this a very useful way to go. So, as a result, there are a large number of traditions associated with Twelfth Night and the celebration of Plough Monday, a lot of which are really deeply embedded in the traditions of the villages in England, and when you happen to be on your next tour of the United Kingdom, if it's still united, you might find yourself celebrating surprisingly secular things.

[35 : 27] But it's a deep association, between the agricultural traditions of the country and the deep religious fervor with which the ceremonies are celebrated.

And I know you're all anxious to hear about the Welsh tradition. In Wales, Epiphany is known as Astwyll, so there's a prize of anybody who can pronounce it.

It's spelt Y-S-T-W-Y- double L. And it shows that the letter Y is very favoured in Welsh. And the interesting thing that where the Y comes at the beginning of the word, it's pronounced as a U, and where it comes at the middle of the word, it's pronounced as a Y.

But that's an irrelevancy. Part of the tradition in Wales was that a huge loaf cake was traditionally prepared for the occasion of the Epiphany of our Lord.

And oddly enough, this was divided into three parts to represent Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the three Magi.

[36 : 51] The three Magi just got one part. And again, it was theologically flawed, but that's not so. The Yule log and the Wassailing tradition, to wish farmers a good harvest in the coming year, were in common with the English tradition.

But there was a most curious hunting of the wren tradition in Wales, the wren being the smallest bird. where young men would capture a wren, place it in a small decorated cage, and go from house to house, showing it and asking in exchange for money or gifts of food and drink.

This tradition came to a fairly drastic end in the early part of the 20th century, which was thought to be cruel.

but the idea was to emphasize the epiphany or the revelatory aspect of the epiphany event.

It was a curious cultural adaptation. So having said this, you will appreciate that every single country actually has its own way of celebrating the epiphany of our Lord.

[38 : 28] And I won't bore you with the list of extraordinary customs that you can find out about. And if we were to take the viewpoint that the visit of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem was the only way of celebrating the epiphany of our Lord, this would be an unfortunate.

Some of the traditions are remarkable in terms of trying to reenact the baptismal event, and particularly in Russia, which involves the breaking of the ice and people being dunked into ice-cold water as part of the celebration of epiphany.

So there's all all kinds of curious traditions. The main purpose here was to suggest that the word epiphany is not strong enough, unless it's linked, as is properly done in the BCP, as the epiphany of our Lord, where it obviously is explicit.

But epiphany seems like it's too general, and the theophany, which explicitly tells us that God is making an appearance in our world, and this seems to me to be the more helpful way to think about it.

But I don't suppose it will make any difference, I mean, I don't suppose anybody will pick me up, take me up on this, although we do have the authority of James and Jim to reinforce this, if they think it's a good argument.

[40 : 23] But the important thing is not the word itself, but the actual fact that God moves in our world, and that it's a real test of whether we can see God's action, and whether we can actually rejoice and worship him in the context of this extraordinary, fascinating season.

I'd like to sort of go full circle in terms of my own awareness of the epiphany of our Lord. Why is it that one could live for 20 years in a Christian community and not hear the word epiphany, or theophany for that matter?

Why would one not celebrate this event? there is a tradition of avoiding the celebration of feasts, which seems to me to impoverish the church.

Some of us who've come out of that tradition have found the celebration of the church year extremely helpful, because not only does it focus on such a specific thing as the travels of the Magi and their worshipping of Jesus, but it allows us to see the progression of the work of God through the calendar year.

And I know that Dr. Packer has frequently alerted us to the value of the church year, and I know that James is doing a lot to emphasize that, but it seems to me that from those traditions that do not celebrate such feasts, one is impoverished by the fact.

[42 : 32] Now, it's the accusation of those who do not celebrate these feasts that, of course, people who are celebrating these feasts are ritualists and are not spontaneous enough in their worship.

I don't think that's a helpful argument. I think that the reality is that we need reminding of where we are in God's world, where we are in terms of the revelation of Christ to the non-Jewish community.

We need reminding of the fact that we have been tacked on to the tail end of God's purpose.

And in a sense, that should put us in our place and make us realize how grateful we should be to our God for this theophany.

Thank you.