

Trinity College Cambridge
18 January 2015

FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT

Epiphany

Icons of the Epiphany

Isaiah 42: 1–9 Matthew 2: 1-12

Canon John Binns

We begin with a poem by Steve Turner called 'Christmas is really for the children'.

Christmas is really for the children,
Especially for children who like animals, stables
Stars, and babies wrapped in swaddling clothes.
Then there are the wise men, kings in fine robes,
Humble shepherds, and a hint of rich perfume.

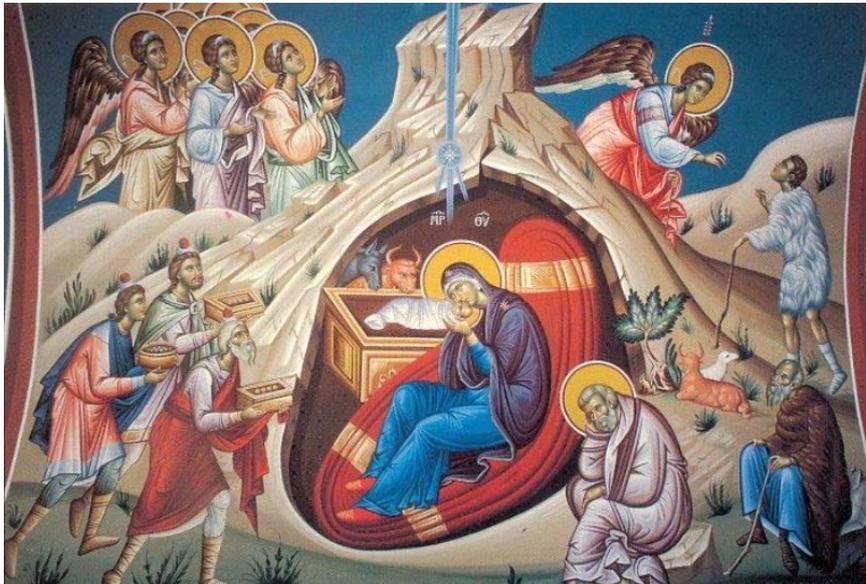
Easter is not really for the children,
Unless accompanied by a cream filled egg.
It has whips, blood, nails, a spear
And allegations of body snatching.
It involves politics, God and the sins of the world
It is not good for people of a nervous disposition.
They would do better to think on rabbits, chickens,
And the first snowdrop of spring.

Or they'd do better to wait for a re-run of Christmas
Without asking too many questions
About what Jesus did when he grew up
Or whether there's any connection.

Epiphany is about what Jesus did when he grew up and what is the connection.

It is about what happens after Christmas. There are several Epiphany readings which connect Christmas and the birth of Christ with later events of his life. There's the visit of the Three Kings, then the Baptism, the Turning of the Water into Wine at the wedding at Cana, and the Calling of the First Disciples. These are all linked as Epiphanies or, to translate this Greek word, revelations or showings. They all point to how the glory of God in Christ is revealed to different people in different ways.

I was asked to suggest a picture to illustrate my theme and I'm grateful that I was permitted to include not one but three pictures. These are all icons. Icon – another Greek word – simply means image. It is painted by an iconographer, and this can be translated as



either icon painter or icon writer, since the Greek *grapho* describes the making of marks on paper and so could be either painting or writing. These linguistic points show us what an icon is. It has a clear message, as the word of God expressed as a picture rather than a written text. This is why we seldom know the names of icon painters, because he or she keeps his personality in the background. All the emphasis is on the content of the icon and what it is saying to us.

It is fascinating to learn the language of icons and to spot the ideas behind it. Take the icon of the baptism which I have included here. At the feet of Jesus there are two figures in the river. These figures refer us to Psalm 114, which is often understood as a prophecy of the baptism: 'The sea saw that and fled, Jordan was driven back'. So here are the two personifications of the sea and of Jordan doing just that, turning away and fleeing with awe at the presence of the creator of all. Or note the figure of Jesus in the third icon. He wears a red robe, because red is the colour of fire which traditionally is the colour of divinity, and over this is worn a blue robe because blue is the colour of sea and sky and so of the earth. The two robes point to the nature of Jesus who has placed a human nature over his divine nature.

Icons always show the coming of light. Paint is applied in many layers, starting with the darker shades, and becoming increasingly lighter, so that light overlays darkness, and gradually the figures become luminous and shining. The light shines out from the faces and the clothes. With this in mind, look at the first epiphany icon, with the three wise men visiting the Christ child. There is Mary, gently kissing her child, looking on are three wise men, and angels. Joseph is seated outside the cave, recalling a passage in the apocryphal gospel of James, which tells how he went to find a midwife to care for the new mother and on his return was dazzled by the light pouring out of the cave. So he sits contemplatively at a safe distance. The baby is placed in a cave, since that is the place where animals are often kept in the Middle East and in which according to eastern tradition the baby was laid.

But amidst all this action and light, the cave itself is dark and black. It contrasts with the light and colour around to form a solid mass of dark right at the centre of the icon. The light of Christ shines out of the dark cave.

Then look at the second icon, of the baptism. Here we see Jesus in the water. Instead of the mother recognising the child with a kiss, we see the Trinity acknowledging the role of Jesus. The hand of the Father points out of the cloud at the top, the dove of the Holy Spirit descends in the rays of light and rests on the Son, Jesus. But again there's darkness in the centre. This time it's not a cave but the river. The painter has depicted the river as enclosed between two sides, or walls, of rock. Water is often seen as chaos and darkness. It's the formless water for which earth was called, and which rose again to engulf the wicked world in the story of Noah's ark. In the language of iconography, it has the same function as the cave, and like the cave is enclosed by rock. It's the darkness into which Christ descends to be baptised and through his presence he makes the waters of chaos into the waters of life. There is continuity with the icon of Christmas, where the light of the new born Christ in the dark cave, becomes the light of Christ descending into the dark waters of chaos.

The last icon takes us to the end of Christ's life. At the beginning the mother of Jesus gently laid her son in a cave as he was born wrapping him swaddling clothes. Then at the end she takes his body, wraps it in a clean white cloth and again gently places it in the cave which is now a tomb.

However I've chosen here a different resurrection, that of Lazarus the friend of Jesus who has died. He is told about this and comes to weep at the grave. The icon shows him coming, surrounded by his disciples, and calling Lazarus out from the grave back to life. Again there is a cave. It is now on the right of the icon, and Lazarus emerges from it, called back to life by the voice of Christ.

Through these three icons there is one message. There is darkness at the centre of our lives. But Christ enters into this darkness and brings light and life. This is the message of Christmas, of the Baptism, of the Resurrection and of our encounters with Jesus the Son of God. You will find it occurring in other icons too. In one icon book I looked at, the light of the Transfiguration falls in such a way as to leave the three confused apostles in the dark outside the light. And at Pentecost the apostles are in a semi-circle as the Spirit comes, and in the centre of the semi-circle is the same dark space. Saints are often depicted as sitting outside a cave. The dark cave is a feature of many icons, and show how this is the message of the gospel. Light shines in darkness.

There's a haunting phrase which sums up this theme, from the late first century bishop of Antioch, Ignatius. In one of his letters he wrote: 'Mary's virginity was hidden from the prince of this world, so was her child-bearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All these three trumpet tongued secrets were brought to pass in the deep silence of God'. Here again, in the letter of this bishop to the Christians at Ephesus, is the same insight that from the darkness, and silence, of God the mysteries of light and life are encountered.

I have one more thought for you. I have researched Christianity in Ethiopia, one of the ancient Christian countries of the world. Travelling around the mountains of Ethiopia you often encounter churches carved out of caves. The most famous are at the old town of Lalibela, but there are well over 200 examples. This makes the church into something rather different from what we are used to. It is not a building for worship – but instead a space to approach, enter and explore. The sanctuary is in the darkest part at the innermost space. In Ethiopian churches the sanctuary is enclosed by curtains or sometimes a wall, and only clergy are allowed to enter it. The rest of us stand at a distance, conscious that we are approaching the divine which has come to be among us, found in the darkness, but coming to meet and embrace us. Worship is not a gathering for praise and intercession, with hints of sacrifice around the altar. Instead it's a meeting with the divine, located in the deep darkness of mystery yet dwelling among us and coming to us.

The message of these three icons is found in the early verses of St John's gospel. 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it; the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory'.