

The Epiphany

Brueghel's *Adoration of the Magi*
(in the National Gallery, London)

A Sermon preached in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge
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It is rather unlikely, I think, that you will have received Brueghel's *Adoration of the Magi* amongst your Christmas cards this year, or in any previous year for that matter – unless it was me who sent it, and that doesn't count, because I was being ironic. You will, I expect, have had plenty of cards with the three kings in various poses, since the Christmas card industry is not wholly sensitive to the nicety which distinguishes Christmas (with stable and shepherds recounted in Luke's Gospel) from the Epiphany with the visit of the unnumbered and gift-bearing magi or wise men or kings (recounted in Matthew's), and commemorated on the twelfth and last day of Christmas – these visitors from the east having had far to travel, of course, and therefore believed to have arrived a little later than the rest. But you won't have received Brueghel's version (even though he has, in fact, very obligingly partially merged the two incidents by having his kings arrive at what is plainly a stable), because Brueghel has done something rather different with this scene than those who painted it before or since. In his hands, this is not, as so often, a scene of fine, elegant and idealised devotion which could sit as happily on your mantelpiece as appropriately as it could hang above an altar. This is no Christmas card and it is no conventional altar piece. The scene before us is not one of idealised and moving devotion, but instead of ugly, questionable or even craven characters.

There is a clue to the nature of Brueghel's interpretation of this scene in an absence we may not readily notice. In the elaboration of the Nativity story which went on in the middle ages, animals were added to the tableau in the stable, even though of course, Luke's Gospel makes no mention of them. It is this (perfectly understandable) elaboration which has given the lowing cattle, the little donkey, and so on, all now vital figures in any Nativity play. Now as the stable filled up, a text from Isaiah, having no previous link with the Nativity, came to hand and proved serviceable. Isaiah writes, apropos of something else altogether, that 'The ox knows its master and the ass its master's crib.' (Isaiah 1, 3) So

here were two of the animals from the stable, and, rather happily, a moral contrast between them which would serve for sermons, admonitions and homilies. The ox – the good ox – knows its master, but the ass knows only its master’s crib, where to find its food. And many paintings show both animals: the ox, sometimes piously down on one knee looking as worshipful as is humanly possible for an ox, so to speak, and the ass tucking into the hay, too busy eating to pay attention to the birth of its master. Brueghel, notice, has included only the ass, intent on his meal, in the gloom of the stable, but no good, pious and prayerful ox to balance the scene. And so, as we look at the painting, it continues. Brueghel paints sinners, not saints.

We might start with Joseph, very often portrayed, as here, as having been drawing his pension for a good many years (the better to protect the Virgin Mary’s modesty), and possessed of the dignity and wisdom of age (the better to protect the infant Jesus). Brueghel’s Joseph, however, while certainly being a good age, has little of dignity and wisdom about him, and could serve in another painting as a scruffy innkeeper. And far from being attentive to his family, he is distracted; and distracted, in another elaboration of the story beloved of those who retold it in the middle ages, by the devil, albeit in human form, whispering in his ear and encouraging him to wonder whether he can really trust the tale he has been told that this child has no human father.

If the distracted Joseph adds no charm to the scene, neither do the bystanders on the right-hand side who certainly look good company for the devil. One wears glasses, these being the vital prop in many paintings for misers, money lenders and tax collectors, whose eyes are strained by counting and recounting and counting again their coins. (If you look very hard at Caravaggio’s *Call of St Matthew* on the front of the Chapel Term card, you will notice that one of Matthew’s associates has glasses to help him keep a sharp eye on the cash on the table before him). You can, perhaps hardly see the bespectacled miser or money lender or whatever he is in a smallish reproduction, but if you can you will also see that his attention has been caught by the gaudy trinket held by the king in white robes – indeed he is practically ogling this shiny object.

And what of those kings? Suffice it to say of the first one, the one standing in the white robes, that in 1564 when Brueghel painted this picture, no one had entertained the thought which occurred to advertising agencies in the late 80s or mid-90s, that black is cool. And of the two others? Looking at them I am reminded of the story – surely apocryphal? – of the occasion when the saintly Edward King, professor of moral theology in Oxford in the 1870s, arrived at the great west door of Lincoln cathedral to be enthroned as bishop. The doors were flung open for him, he saw his assembled clergy for the first time, and is said to have quoted the book of Revelation, 20, 13: ‘And behold, the sea gave up its

dead'. For here they are, these two corpse-like kings, with gestures as graceless as their features, dressed in their very best pantomime robes. And then, continuing round the painting, we have the soldiers. One of them is gawping, as well he might, at these ungainly monarchs. The others stand in a mass in the top corner, one with an inane expression, another with one of those skull-like faces which Brueghel learnt from Bosch and used in his own apocalyptic scenes of human vanity and divine judgement. But what these soldiers add, I think, even in their thronged idleness, is a sense of menace which has little of the pantomime about it. The National Gallery in London, where this painting is displayed, used to have a notice beside this picture which speculated that Brueghel may have included soldiers in his painting because at the time the painting was completed, the Netherlands, where he worked, was at arms and full of soldiers. It seems, at best, a rather half-developed thought, since had Brueghel simply wanted to fill the canvas with subjects which were ready to hand, he might presumably have just as well included some windmills, tulips and cheese, none of which is in short supply in the Netherlands. Perhaps it would be better to notice that the soldiers, in their menacing mass, stand ready to accomplish the next scene in the story of the kings recounted in Matthew's Gospel, also painted by Brueghel on a number of occasions, the massacre of the innocents – and there is nothing in their demeanour to suggest that they have the moral fortitude or character to oppose the orders they will receive.

Finally we come to the painting's centre, the Madonna and child. Even here there is no relief from Brueghel's unsentimental gaze and portrayal. There is no beautiful, fresh and innocent Madonna of the kind Raphael depicts. And the baby, bald and in his features old before his time – what can we say about the poor child, but that he bears an uncanny resemblance to certain recent leaders of the Tory party? Even at the very centre there is neither grandeur nor grace, no evocation of tenderness or love. Just a slightly dumpy mother with her awkward and seemingly ill-favoured child.

So the question is, is Brueghel mocking? Is this non-Christmas card poking fun at the whole thing? Is this a satire or a parody, intending to bring the scene down from the mantelpiece or altar once and for all? In offering us this frankly rather grotesque dumbshow, peopled with folly and wickedness, does Brueghel mean to ridicule and slight?

I think that the contrary is, in fact, the case. By rejecting any sentimentality surrounding this scene, Brueghel indicates that he has fathomed and means to represent a deeper truth than any such sentimentality could convey. For what those idealised portrayals tend to conceal from view, with their saintly figures in saintly poses, is the real mystery of the Incarnation and the Epiphany.

As you look at those classic scenes more likely to be found on Christmas cards, you may be lulled into a sense that what unfolds before us is, so to speak, natural and only to be expected. Typically a magnificent and beautiful mother with her haloed baby is surrounded by figures as graceful and worshipful as the scene they observe. The Incarnation of the Son – his being God and man – is as plain to view as it could be, and so his Epiphany or manifestation to the world – this oh so noble and graceful world – naturally summons devotion and worship and piety, all of it worthy of altars and Christmas cards.

What Brueghel paints instead, holds the central mystery of Incarnation and Epiphany. The baby, to human eyes, is just a baby – and this naked infant is as real as any other, albeit perhaps uglier than most. So, if we might put it like this, in this painting the far from obviously divine is displayed and manifest to the questionably human. The Epiphany is not to those who are ready and fit to receive such a guest, nor to those with such profound spiritual insight that they will inevitably fathom what unfolds before them. No. Christ does not come to those who are noble, beautiful in body and soul, blameless in thought, word or deed. He does not come to saints but to sinners, not to the graceful figures of renaissance art, but to the undesirable and unappealing specimens whom Brueghel gathers in this painting.

But to portray this double mystery of a hidden God displayed to blind, unseeing people, is not to mock the Gospel, but to understand it. For there is in fact no Gospel, no good news, in a story of a god who comes as god to his godly people and – surprise, surprise – is received with a good deal of courtesy. The good news of the Gospel is found in the proclamation of the truth that graciously God comes to man as man, and comes to man, not in his supposed merits and qualities, but comes to man just as man has no merits or qualities, just as he is as ugly and ridiculous and bumbling and menacing and craven and vain and foolish as these people performing their disturbing pantomime before us. And the glory is that this God, concealed from human eyes, not only comes to the least promising but for the least promising, to draw them into community with Him as He elicits their worship and devotion. The Incarnation is for all and the Epiphany is to all. This is as unpropitious as it can be – and yet God, in hiding, secretly gathers to Himself a community which, wonderfully unworthy, will be yet more wonderfully transformed. If this painting, being a painting of one moment in this story, does not depict the transformation, it does depict where the story of Christ starts and what it will be about.

Amongst the letters of the great Augustine is one he wrote to a political figure of some seniority, a provincial official who sat as a judge in north Africa, in an area close to Augustine's diocese. It seems that the official was surprised, or even displeased, that a Bishop should be pleading for clemency, as

Augustine had, for a condemned and notorious criminal. And in the course of his letter justifying his action, Augustine quotes a remark of Seneca: 'He who hates bad men hates all men.'¹

With that thought in mind, we might grasp two things. First, we should grasp why, in fact, although it could not serve as a traditional Christmas card, this painting by Brueghel might very appropriately sit on our mantelpieces. Brueghel tells us that the community which God gathers round His Son, the community to whom this Son is made manifest at the Epiphany and to whom he is given at Christmas, is a community of men, of bad men, a community with all the ugliness and unworthiness of human existence. And if we learn with Seneca that 'he who hates bad men hates all men', and know ourselves well enough not to balk at the implication that 'he who hates bad men hates himself', we might find ourselves glad in this unsentimental, even ignoble scene. We may find consolation in the truth which Brueghel has grasped, I think – that if God calls these rogues, He may just call us.

There is, however, a second thing. It is the correlate of the message of consolation – for Augustine wrote to Macedonius, the official in question, not to console him (though there was consolation there if he was open to it). Augustine wrote to him to challenge him. He wrote to insist, as Christian witness has faithfully insisted down the centuries, that the message of God's mercy in the Incarnation and in the Epiphany calls for mercy from us. God did not and does not hate bad men, therefore (that great word of the New Testament Epistles), human justice, however it strives, as it must, to restrain evil and contention and wickedness, must nonetheless, at the very same time, represent something of the mercy with which God deals with us.

It would, I think, be wholly fatuous to comment critically on the manner of Saddam Hussein's execution, since I doubt, or at least hope, that there would be no one found to defend its manner. (Note that I do say manner, since a discussion of the death penalty, as such, would be another matter altogether.) But it is far from otiose, I fear, to say that what seemed in this case to cause concern and comment (namely the failure to respect the dignity even of one properly condemned), is far from being uncommon in the generality of cases. It has become only too commonplace in our contemporary culture to refer to prisoners – if not all, then at least to some – as if they are not deserving of such respect, which must express itself in a concern for their dignity, humane treatment and general welfare. Doubtless the care and welfare of prisoners has never been a popular cause, no more popular in Africa in the fifth century when Augustine wrote that letter than in our day. But should we not be ashamed on behalf of the society in which we live, when, to take two egregious examples, the Sun newspaper, on

¹ Augustine, Political Writings, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge, 2001), Letter 153.

the death of Myra Hindley, could have a headline, 'May she rot in hell'; or when, on the death by suicide of Harold Shipman, our then Home Secretary could declare, 'I felt like opening a bottle of champagne'? Rather than opening a bottle of champagne, it would have been well for the Home Secretary to have pondered Augustine's words in that same letter: 'It is easy and simple to hate evil men because they are evil, but uncommon and dutiful to love them because they are men'.

I have picked some stark examples, for the sake of making a point and making it briefly. The point is simply illustrative of what I take to be one aspect of the challenge contained in the consolation of Incarnation and Epiphany, the consolation and challenge to which Brueghel directs us. The consolation and challenge are, of course, but the two sides of the one truth – the consolation that God's openness to all is openness to us, is, to put it the other way, the challenge that God's openness to us is openness to all. So, let us put the card on our mantelpieces or above our altars, and, just as we take to heart the consolation to which it points (that the Epiphany of Christ is his manifestation to all, to the unlovely and the unloved), may we also find it in our hearts and lives to rise to the challenge of which it also speaks, the challenge to live out our common humanity in mercy towards all those whom it is only too easy to hate or despise.