

Trinity College Chapel
5 February 2012

Scenes from the Life of Christ: Epiphany
Isaiah 60: 1–9 Matthew 2: 1–21

Hieronymus Bosch, *Triptych of the Epiphany*, c. 1495, oil on panel,
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

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What is an Epiphany?

A sudden moment of insight? A shaft of light?

A bath overflowing? A light bulb glowing?

An apple on the head? A jump out of bed?

What is an Epiphany?

And how does the picture in front us help us answer that question?

This evening's painting is part of a triptych altarpiece by Hieronymus Bosch. [There's a panel either side. We can't see them this evening, but Peeter appears on the left panel, accompanied by his namesake Saint Peter, and Agnes appears on the right panel, accompanied by hers, Saint Agnes. Both are wearing robes of sober black. Agnes sports a white veil and Peter a fur collar. They are, to quote *Shakespeare in Love*, 'the money'. They commissioned it over 500 years ago, around 1495. They are dressed like people who can afford to commission altarpieces. They kneel, their hands clasped in prayer. Their gaze fixed on the scene in the central panel. The respectful devotion of Peeter and Agnes in the wings flanks that of the three kings centre stage. In passing, it's worth noting, that we're not just being invited to contemplate Christ ourselves. We're also being invited to admire something else: this pious couple as *they* adore Christ.]

Let's turn our attention, then, to the scene in the central panel: the scene that you have printed. In front of a dilapidated, semi-ruined stable-like thatched house the Virgin Mary, redheaded, pale and serene in black, holds the Christ child on her knee. He sits alert and upright on a little handkerchief, looking intently at the kings (for Bosch almost certainly not wise men, magi or astronomers). The kings appear largely as tradition dictates, one old man, one young man and one black man, all richly dressed and bearing gifts. Not many immediate surprises here then. Have a careful look by Mary's feet, near to oldest King. You might just be able to make out a miniature of Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac. Then look at the second king: on the collar: the Queen of Sheba brings gifts to King Solomon. Here are tiny clues as to what's going on in larger picture. But still not many immediate surprises there then. Look beyond that central group of characters, and things quickly start to get a bit weird.

First of all, look at the group of men, standing in the doorway of the little house. One looks like he's just escaped from Bedlam or *Celebrity Big Brother* – scantily in a pink robe, showing a lot of leg, with a slightly mad and elaborate hat on his head. Art historians have a field day with him. Who is he? Some say Herod, another a figure that has anti-Semitic resonances. And the metal bands around his calf, what were they for? What do they mean? Possibly to heal a wound, possibly to refer to an Old Testament character (Balam in *Numbers* 24: 17) or possibly designed to inflict discomfort for penitential, devotional purposes. I wonder whether Bosch, like the Humanist writer Erasmus enjoyed sending up Folly – especially among powerful and wealthy. (Cf Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*). He seems to have stolen the crown of the first wise man. Ha. GOT IT. And he looks pretty pleased with himself for doing so. Behind him, there's a darker face with a slightly sneering expression, and several other shadowy faces, also visible within the house. Not quite the *Adams Family*, but the walls are alive. They speak of threat.

Second, have a look at the people on the right hand side of the painting, peering through the plaster, climbing onto the roof and hauling himself up a tree. They're dressed in the muted colours of working people, and they carry various slightly odd objects, including bagpipes and fowling sticks. The man with the bagpipes has the courtesy not to disturb the scene by playing flower of Scotland or some nationalist, Dutch ditty. He's more interested pointing to his mates what's going on below. They, too, want a glimpse of what's happening in the foreground. If they're shepherds then they are less respectful and reverent than many shepherds found in other Epiphany paintings.

Third, have a look above the house, two bands of turbaned horsemen carrying flags, who appear to be having a miniature crusade (or joust or battle) in the background. Some art historians think that these are the troops of the kings inside. In other words, while 'their highnesses' are inside doing the religious bit, 'let's beat the living daylights out of each other'. [And how far is there a critical edge to Bosch's work here? Observing how, while people pray in church, violence continues outside? Like us today praying while reports of killings in Syria continue.] In some other epiphany pictures you can see in the background something even darker, something truly horrific: troops massacring babies. Alluding to what happens next in the Gospel of Matthew – Herod's order to kill all baby boys under 2 years of age.

Check them out online, if you are interested, as there are some more bizarre details above the Peeter and Agnes on the side panels too: a man flashing a woman, a man getting savaged by a wild boar, and a woman being chased by a wolf. Bosch plays with images, vices and virtues. He uses Dutch sayings to inform other parts of his work. I guess you could say: 'All par for the course' for Hieronymus Bosch's wild imagination, the man who painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights* but rather odd nonetheless.¹

¹ See Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *The Northern Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 2004). Smith suggests that 'Bosch's idiosyncratic imagination is unrivalled.' He claims that: 'This helps to explain his enduring appeal.' pp. 212-15 and pp. 333-340.

Well, what is all this about? Who are all these odd people, and what are they doing in Bosch's depiction of the Epiphany scene? I think the answer, or at least one answer, has something to do with how the picture was first used.

Some people will kneel before it like the wise men: composed, respectful, adoring and richly dressed. Wealthy merchants and townspeople might even see in the kings and patrons a reflection of themselves. But others will kneel in front of that altarpiece, too: the mad, the sick, the disfigured, the ordinary, the mocking, the doubting, the heart-broken. It's visible, available to everybody.

Like the kings, Bosch's picture has travelled. At first this altarpiece was intended for public display during worship. Its original home was in St John's Cathedral in 's-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands. Then Philip II brought it back to his palace near Madrid, in Spain. There Bosch's work was seen as bizarre, strange. Maybe the Spanish didn't get the Dutch jokes. Then the several hundred years later in the early 20th century Bosch was seen as groovy, exotic and then even sexy. It now hangs in the Prado in Madrid. Put on a talking guide and it will tell you about the paintings original historical context.

This picture (like the Magi in Matthew's gospel) have journeyed: an object of devotion in a cathedral, then exotica, then a museum piece, now online and potentially everywhere. By bringing back into a chapel, with wonderful music and singing, into a service of worship, brings it full circle. Through this 500 year journey the picture has been made available, made visible to many different pairs of eyes.

The painting is a kind of mirror: in the painting, as with those who gaze upon it in church, in a palace, in a gallery and online. Christ is not just beheld by the talented, the powerful and the wealthy, he is also beheld by the weak, and the ordinary and the poor. In this picture Christ is offered to everyone.²

That, I think, is the key not just to the painting, but to today's readings too. In the readings earlier on, we heard about *two* kinds of epiphany. In the reading from Isaiah (60: 1–9), we heard those words, 'Arise, shine out, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you'. In the restored, re-gathered Israel, God's glory will be made manifest to all the nations. Sons and daughters will be gathered in, streams of people will flood to Jerusalem to the restored Temple. God's glory will be manifest, made real and recognised in God's glorified people. Here is Epiphany.

In the reading from Matthew (2: 1–12), we hear about a slightly different epiphany – a quieter one. He appears as a child, in Bethlehem of Judea. No fanfares or choruses of angels greet his birth in Matthew's gospel. Matthew simply states that 'Jesus was born'. A new star in the east guides the wise men to find this new king of the Jews, and they

² See Walter S. Gibson's discussion of Bosch's two Epiphany paintings in, *Hieronymus Bosch* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973). He observes how the Christ child impulsively stretches out towards the Kings in the earlier Philadelphia *Epiphany*, (p.20). Gibson goes on to contrast this with Bosch's later more formal and enigmatic version, the Prado *Epiphany*, discussed in this sermon and by Gibson, pp. 97-120.

adore him with the gifts Isaiah mentions (gold and frankincense) and one Isaiah doesn't mention (myrrh). But this brief moment of recognition is soon eclipsed by Herod's infanticidal paranoia. The danger and the threat in the background in the walls invades the foreground. And Jesus is spirited away to Egypt during the night by his parents.

In the midst of that violence, confusion and heartbreak there interrupts: *the epiphany*. But it breaks through not in a palace, not in a demonstration, not in a TV studio, but in a naked child who can be gazed at or ignored, loved or hated. Brought a gift or killed with a sword. The Christ who sits in Mary's hands in Bosch's painting is placed into our hands, too – he is unprotected. Christ's visibility and availability points towards his vulnerability.

Close the wings of this triptych. Look at the outer panel and you will see another part of the story. A bleeding figure, half naked with a crown of thorns, mocked and rejected. [Christ is appearing in the midst of the mass. Bosch appears to be portraying the 'miracle of the mass of St Gregory', where Christ appears to a woman who has mocked the Eucharist]. A figure is looking up at him. We only see the back of this viewer's head. Invited to look again at the scene ourselves.

Imagine now that you are open up the painting's doors. Look again at the central panel by Bosch. Imagine you are looking for the first time: we see a still child. In Bosch's painting he sits naked, completely exposed in the sight of the adoring wise men, and to our sight. At his death he will be stripped again, exposed to the accusing gaze of people crying out for his death. He will be presented to us again, not by Mary this time, but by Pilate: 'Behold the man.'

This is the epiphany.

Christ's availability meets with recognition and faith, but also rejection and crucifixion. What began with gold and frankincense will appear to end with myrrh and the tomb. But this isn't an epiphany gone wrong, some horrible, tragic miscalculation or mistake. This – this vulnerability, this nakedness, this complete availability to human love, human misunderstanding, even human hate – this is God's gift, God's epiphany. God in Christ is available to everybody.