

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sunday, January 8, 2017: The Baptism of Our Lord
Sermon, The Rev. Timothy Cole
Matthew 3:13-17

Well, I hope you all had a wonderful return to work or to normal life and a great start to 2017.

How are the New Year's Resolutions going? In thinking about this coming year, if you are feeling positive, you might like Alfred Lord Tennyson's words:

"Hope smiles from the threshold of the year to come, whispering, 'It will be happier.'"

If you are not feeling so positive you may be more alongside Mark Twain when he says

"Sometimes too much to drink is barely enough"

Regardless of that, I hope we can all join with the 18th century pastor Jonathan Edwards in saying

"Resolution One: I will live for God. Resolution two: If no one else does, I still will."

I watched a film over the break called *The Imitation Game*. It is a rather tragic but fascinating story about a man called Alan Turing and how he, and some fellow mathematicians, cracked the secret German military code called 'Enigma.' He builds a machine to try and help work through the millions of combinations of possible letters that each day's setting of the code produced. It took many, many months without result. The hundreds of millions of combinations were just too many to work through, even with this photo computer he had designed and built. One day, however, the team had a Eureka moment: they realized that the daily 6:00 a.m. German weather report always ended with the same words; "Heil Hitler!" With this, and one or two other repetitions elsewhere, they were able to narrow down the number of possible combinations enough to decode any message the Germans sent. It is said that this single piece of work shortened WWII by two years and saved many millions of lives.

As we enter the season of Epiphany, we begin to reflect on what an epiphany actually is.

On its most basic level, it is a moment of realization. An 'Ah ha!' moment when we finally get the answer to a crossword clue, or work out how to assemble a piece of Ikea furniture! (How did they ever get away with that business model? Sell people a pile of wood and charge them to make their own furniture. I wish I had thought of that!)

Yet, our real epiphanies go further than just intellectual realization. They are those moments in our lives that stand out to us. As we look back, they come to our minds easily, as those points of light in our experience where, somehow, our understanding was opened and we saw something we had not seen. These precious moments are not always appreciated by those around us, I am afraid.

I remember climbing a peak in the Lake District with some British Army Officers I was working with at the time. Uncharacteristically for the Lake District in England, it was a glorious sunny day and, after we had labored to the top, (army people can never enjoy a walk: they always have to

make it into a forced march! It is always head down until you get to the top!) and after I had caught what was left of my breath, we all enjoyed the most spectacular of views. It seemed to me such a clear and wonderful demonstration of the glory of God and I happened to comment that I wondered how anyone looking at this could not believe in God. One of the officers replied with a wry smile, "It's just geology, Padre. Just geology!" But of course, whatever 'it' is, it is most definitely not just geology.

Our epiphanies just come to us. They may be on their way for a long time but, when they arrive, they are always a surprise. Like the moment we realized that we were in love with someone we had known for a long time as a friend or that moment we hear someone's voice and just know that this is the voice of the person we will marry one day. That happened to a friend of mine, and they did marry and are still married to each other.

Or again, the moment that we know what we must do in some important matter regardless of what may come of it. I remember such a moment on operations in Iraq. I had a bad feeling about a journey by helicopter at night into a location that got more than its fair share of attention from the enemy. You get these feelings sometimes when you are living in that kind of environment, but of course, if you listened to them, you would never go anywhere. And once you have made the decision to accept whatever may come there is a certain peace about that, and something changes quite deep inside you.

What all these experiences possess is a certain clarity and a certain sense of having reached to the heart of the matter in some way. 'This is what I now realize that I am.' 'This is the path I need to be on' or, sometimes, like St Paul on the road to Damascus, 'This is absolutely the wrong path and not the direction I should be going.'

"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Today we witness Jesus' own epiphany. The child, whose coming the wise men from the East first saw in the heavens, sensed in their minds, and then found at the end of their long journey, now comes to John the Baptist and seeks the washing away of sin and the new birth into the life of God.

This is Jesus' own epiphany, his own realization of who he is, and his own experience of the immensity and intimacy of God and his Spirit. It is also where others begin to see who he is. St Peter, in this morning's first reading from Acts, points to this moment in his sermon as a key to understanding who Jesus is. In it we have a very direct vision of the Holy Trinity in one action: the Father speaking, the Son hearing, and the Holy Spirit anointing. St Peter, sees this event, together with Jesus' Resurrection, as the central reasons for believing that this is the Christ that God has ordained as the judge of the all the living and the dead.

The epiphanies we encounter in our own lives are not as different from this as we might first assume. We can be changed, and we can also be changed in the eyes of others. At a wedding the bride and groom appear to us in a new light as man and wife. They are forever changed, not just to each other, but to us and the world. At an ordination, the ordained are made into something new. They are anointed, laid hands upon and changed in our eyes, commissioned into the service they are given to.

Epiphanies are not always sudden or blinding flashes of realization either. They can also be the product of long and hard journeys.

The Magi, as imagined by T.S. Eliot in the poem by the same name, convey just such a sense of a long and hard road to reach this new understanding.

*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.*

Alan Turing and the team at Bletchley Park must have felt that often in the long months of failure before they broke the code.

You and I, in our poor halting attempts to follow in Christ's way, may also feel that many times. Yet this season of Epiphany reminds us that, however hard the road and however poor we are at traveling it, we know we can never be happy going back, having seen what we have seen and experienced what we have experienced. Like Eliot's Magi, we know we have been involved in a birth and a death that is our own as well as his.

*this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Those moments in life that surprise us with light, those hard journeys that leave us homeless nomads except we find again the light of that stable and the shadow of that cross, those epiphanies that light our way from there to here, from then till now, these are what we will look for in this brand new year.

I pray for many epiphanies for all of us in 2017.