

Rector's Sermon

Epiphany Sunday 2021

Metaphors matter! A metaphor, as I am sure you are aware, is a figure of speech that is used to make a comparison between two things that aren't alike but do have something in common and metaphors, as I am sure you are also aware, abound throughout Scripture; tools of poetry and prose which illuminate, reveal and invite us into deeper insights and understandings.

Our relationships with metaphors though are not static but fluid. Metaphors that held currency within a particular historical context may not serve us so well within our present context. Our understanding or, dare I say it, lack of understanding of the power of metaphor have influenced our inherited theologies of Race, Gender, Disability, Creation, Human Sexuality and Socio Economics, but with fresh insights and new discoveries in science and reflecting on our present social communal contexts, many are reassessing the metaphors of the past within the context of the present.

For example, for centuries our use of metaphor has equated disability with sin, unbelief and doubt; an understanding that underpins so much of our present unhealthy theologies of creation, healing, identity and image.

Today as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, I wish to focus on the metaphors of light and darkness. The metaphors of light and darkness are pervasive throughout Holy Scripture and Church tradition. In fact the imagery of light and darkness reaches its zenith now, on the Feast of the Epiphany. For those of us in the northern hemisphere, this is the feast, in the lean light of January, when we often speak of Christ as brightness, as radiance, as the child bathed in starlight—attempting to articulate how an Incarnate God is not simply present among us, but revealed to us, just as the day is revealed by its dawning.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,” declares Isaiah; it is an invitation to wake from sleep, to gather in the holy places, to pay homage to the one true Gift: God’s desire to know and be known by us. “We observed his star at its rising,” the Magi say, and it is a reminder that even the light of inconceivably distant galaxies has been caught up in the narrative of Divine Love made manifest, reaching across the vastness of space to find itself reflected in the eyes of an infant Lord.

For all the beauty of this imagery, however, and despite its centrality to our faith tradition, as people of this time and place we must contend in new ways with the ideas of darkness and light. We must be mindful of how this dichotomy has been used not only to depict the landscapes of spiritual consciousness but has also been misapplied to the physicality of people themselves, as if the colour of our skin were an indicator of our soul’s worth.

This is especially true for those of us who live and worship in the West; we cannot casually equate “light” with God and “darkness” with evil or ignorance in our preaching and our prayers, without realizing how these very terms have been corrupted in recent centuries by our own sinfulness and that of our forebears—by this nation’s history of equating skin colour with moral and spiritual capacities. All of us, no matter our background or good intentions, are inheritors of this bitter reality, and as Christians attentive to justice and reconciliation and breaking down that which disfigures

flourishing community, part of our own emerging Epiphany is a frank assessment of how language can harm just as powerfully as it can heal. Events of this past year powerfully attest to that.

But it is really important to stress that neither is this about erasing the use of traditional imagery, nor is it about excising uncomfortable or challenging portions of Scripture. Rather, it is about taking these resources even more seriously than we have up to this point in human history: sitting with them, wrestling with them, plumbing the depths of Christian writing and hymnody to incorporate the full scope of ways we might speak about God—the One whom John calls “the true light... coming into the world,” but also the One of whom the psalmist says, “darkness and light to you are both alike.” The God whom Isaiah promises will be our “everlasting light” and the One whom the mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius calls “the ray of divine darkness.” We need a language where metaphors of light and darkness both speak in positive and affirming ways.

Rich and varied use of such metaphorical language preserves us from two extremes: first, from assuming that this imagery has no intrinsic power of its own to shape our social consciousness (it most certainly does); and second, from idolizing such imagery as if it were itself God (it most certainly isn’t). It is in fact the tension of opposites and the playful spectrum between them, that we find our language’s best attempt at expressing the inexpressible, the experience of which we celebrate today.

For many of us, these considerations might feel like uncharted terrain. As such, the Magi in Matthew’s Gospel are ideal guides for our journey—strangers from another land, led through the night by wonder and hope, following the path to Christ fixed in the stars (which, of course, can only be seen in the dark). The Magi are not bound by the political machinations of Herod; they are not beholden to the present order of domination and exploitation. Instead, they are guided by dreams and visions, by the wisdom of hidden roads, by attentiveness to the signs around them. And in their journey—one that is itself the union of brightness and shadow—they are led to the place of our collective longing: to gaze upon the hidden face of God and to know that it is indeed God gazing back, beyond metaphor, beyond language itself, as pure, Incarnate presence.

How might we, too, encounter God again, if we are courageous enough to think deeply about the language we use to approach Divine Mystery? How might we, too, be guided to travel “by another road,” a road upon which we acknowledge the limits and the lamentable uses of “light” and “dark” in our recent past and then push beyond them? What new ways might we dream of to depict and express the epiphany that God is, and always has been, reaching out from across eternity to abide with us, to heal us, to bring us back to ourselves?

For us, as Anglicans, this is an instance where our liturgy, our theological process, and God’s mission converge to do a brave new thing. As with any worthwhile journey, this is not one that can be finished quickly, nor can it be done alone. We must listen to one another, and to the voices of others whose lives are quite different from our own. As Michelle Obama states in her memoir ‘Becoming’, ‘It is harder to hate up close’. We are called to get up close so that we are able to love our enemy. We must be willing to hold ourselves accountable for speaking eternal truth in new and varied ways, knowing that even our most beautiful language is but a foretaste of the beauty that will one day be revealed in its fullness. But until then, it is what we have to offer.

“They all gather together, they come to you,” Isaiah promises the Holy City of God, and still we are coming, traversing the ages, stumbling, lost, hopeful, guided by stars and secret longings, to the place that is neither dark nor light, but deep and dazzling none-the-less; the place

of love's Epiphany, distant, hidden, home, the Word made Flesh. The Epiphany that Jesus Christ our Lord came for and loves every single human being; a love that transcends ability, human sexuality, race, gender, age, economics; a risen Lord; an incarnated Lord. O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.