

Sunday 6th January, 2019
The Feast of the Epiphany - Year C

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7.10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of God; born among us, searched for, worshipped and adored. Amen.

The Epiphany is a great story... Eastern astrologers discover a new star in the heavens... and something... someone... calls them... and they follow. Yes, there is the star and there is the belief that it heralds the birth of a new king... but what actually draws them... and what inner hope or need are they trying to fulfil? And when they find the child in the stable, I wonder... is their yearning satisfied; are they at peace now? Do they look back on the journey as older men and name it as wisdom or folly?

Their story plays out one of the great metaphors of religious life... the journey! We journey... drawn by a light, a hope we sometimes glimpse flickering ahead of us in the distance. We journey, called by a barely-discerned whisper of invitation and promise. As religious people, we go in search of God, the 'mysterious Other'.

Today, I want to draw on the experiences of a man whose journey has been anything but straightforward - in the hope that we might draw strength and insight for our own journey.

Richard Holloway grew up in an essentially non-religious family. But as a boy he would wander for hours through the hills of his Scottish home. And there in that experience, before he had any religious language to describe it, he sensed the presence of the 'Holy Other'. He describes it in his 2012 autobiography as the "mystery of latency"... "the sense of something just out of reach, someone unseen that listens!" In fact he calls God the "invisible listener"... "the silent listener who haunted me but never spoke."

As an adolescent, Christianity and church gave him both a language and a vehicle for this search. Trained in theology while still a teenager... ordained as priest and then later a bishop... his gifts propelled him to the role of the head of the Scottish Church while still in his 40's.

Through all this, he was propelled onward by the personal yearning to know that elusive God he'd sensed in the hills of his childhood. And he wanted certainty... that is, to know that he'd actually arrived at the stable where the star stopped (to use the Epiphany metaphor)... He wanted what he assumed would be the peace of having arrived at that final destination... the fulfilment that awaits the successful conclusion of the quest.

But certainty and completion never came... and he felt the God he searched for never answered, no matter how much he called. In his autobiography he describes the experience through a poem called *The Listeners* by Walter de la Mare...

“A traveller arrives at a house in the forest
and gets no answer to his repeated knocking.
‘Is anybody there?’ said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest’s ferny floor;
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller’s head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
‘Is anybody there?’ he said.
He knocks for a third time, with no result.
‘Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word’, he said.
He gets back on his horse and rides away...”

This is a deeply unsettling poem... that anyone should endure such agony... ‘I have searched... I have knocked and called... and no one answered!’ But it is Richard Holloway’s experience. Holloway’s honesty disturbs me... I’m challenged by it... threatened even.

Richard Holloway became increasingly disgusted with what he saw as the church's pretence of certainty... especially when it used this to condemn and persecute minorities. The final straw was the Lambeth Conference of 1998 when a bitterly-contested rejection of homosexuality (with which we still live) became established as the official Anglican position. A year or so later he resigned, saying he no longer had sufficient certainty to promote the Christian faith in any official capacity, let alone as a bishop.

At first it appeared as if he had indeed lost all semblance of faith, and there were indeed 'days of anger' in his public statements. I listened with sadness as he described himself as 'one no longer on the Christian journey'. Then in 2012 he released his autobiography - still powerfully critical of the church in its hypocrisy and corruption, but so generous... compassionate; so human... real, authentic and honest... and a profound inspiration and an encouragement to keep going... to stay on the journey.

No, he doesn't have sufficient belief to represent the Christian faith, and yet he wants the church to live. To be there for people... because he understands the deep human ache we have for 'God' (however defined), and how empty godlessness is.

He is no enemy of the church... but what he asks of us is that we be honest, and that instead of promoting a rigid certainty and using it to criticise others, we be honest about our journey... a journey that explores infinite mystery... a journey that follows a star whose destination is beyond even our best imagining.

I love the story of Epiphany, and the religious metaphor of the journey - it is a metaphor that has been dominant in my life of faith. It often feels like a search for God, a noble quest to find the 'invisible Listener', a heroic journey of exploration into the mystery of the divine...

But these days I am also cautious. Because the search is also an illusion - that is, God is immediately and eternally with us... or to use another metaphor, 'God is the sea in which we swim... the air that we breathe.'

Thus the feeling of distance and separation - which we all feel - is perception not reality... it is the fruit of our fear and our holding-back.

God is our one and only home. God always calls... whispers... beckons... It is not so much a matter of us bridging a terrible divide, as much as us waking-up... clearing the mist that blankets our eyes and seeing truly where we are.

So to conclude with one of Richard Holloway's favourite poems, by the 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi...

“Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, come even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come - come yet again, come.”

Amen.