

EPIPHANY GIFTS

The Magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, presenting them to Jesus.  
They shared the precious things they had,  
the things that meant most to them,  
which spoke to them of God,  
and they offered them up as gifts.

Each year at Epiphany I offer you three things:  
A piece of music, a poem, and a picture  
that are precious to me,  
that mean something to me  
and somehow speak to me of God.  
They have been gifts to me,  
perhaps they will be gifts for you too?

**FIRST GIFT: MUSIC**

The piece of music is a song originally, written by Randy Newman, but here covered by Nina Simone and called '*I think it's going to rain today*'

*'Broken windows and empty hallways  
A pale dead moon in the sky streaked with gray  
Human kindness is overflowing  
And I think it's going to rain today*

*Scarecrows dressed in the latest styles  
With frozen smiles to chase love away  
Human kindness is overflowing  
And I think it's going to rain today.'*

The lyrics are said to be the words of a homeless man walking down the street in the early hours of the morning before dawn, wondering what the day will bring:

*'Human kindness is overflowing/And I think it's going to rain today'*  
Are these words of hope or despair?  
Bitterness or aspiration?  
Optimism or cynicism?  
We can see it either way, or both, which is perhaps the point.

I became aware of this song last year as the sound track to the TV drama 'Broken' about a parish priest in a deeply deprived parish in the north of England.

Each day he dealt with the tragedies and traumas of others while also hurting from his own personal tragedies and childhood traumas.

He was a wounded man.  
But a wounded healer.

Most of the time we go around trying to pretend that we are whole and perfect, when in fact all of us are hurting and wounded in one way or another.

Christ's power to heal came from his own identification with the suffering of others borne out of his own personal experience. By being baptised in the river Jordan, Christ is insisting on sharing the condition of humanity and its need for forgiveness and healing. He accepted the suffering of the Cross, and even in the Resurrection still bore the scars of that pain.

It is because he was wounded that he can heal us.  
It is because each one of us is wounded that we can heal others.

By this I do not mean a superficial sharing of personal pain.  
But a recognition that all of us are broken and hurting in one way or another.  
Like Christ at his Baptism, identifying with the need of others.  
If we admit this to ourselves then we can relate to others with honesty and compassion. In our mutual weakness, human kindness can overflow as we learn to support each other and become a community that heals.

Like the Risen Christ, still bearing the scars of past wounds, but being healed and redeemed by them too.

## **SECOND GIFT: POEM**

My second gift is the poem 'I built myself a house of glass' by Edward Thomas:

*I built myself a house of glass:  
It took me years to make it:  
And I was proud. But now, alas!  
Would God someone would break it.*

*But it looks too magnificent.*

*No neighbour casts a stone  
From where he dwells, in tenement  
Or palace of glass, alone.*

Recently I was visiting the Palm House at Kew Gardens,  
And there I saw a palm tree that had reached the topmost part of the building.  
The structure protecting it had also become its limitation.  
What would happen now? I wondered.  
Would it press against the glass unable to grow any further?  
Or would the gardeners have to cut the whole thing down and kill it?

In his poem, Thomas talks about the magnificent, beautiful and elaborate  
structures that we create for ourselves.  
Our framework of seeing the world.  
The manner and pattern of our daily lives.  
The story we tell about ourselves and our relationships.  
And the spiritual paradigm of our faith.

Most of the time these structures give us a framework that contains and  
protects us.  
But they can also limit us.  
Breaking them down is frightening,  
But not destroying them might also lead to a kind of death.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of pulling down the Temple and building a  
new one in three days.  
To those around him it was blasphemy to talk of destroying the place of God's  
dwelling.  
It was one of the accusations at his trial and one of the reasons for his death.  
Christ looked at the Temple in Jerusalem and he saw a world in which people  
were trying to manage and contain the Divine. So he offered them a new  
understanding of God in the person of himself.

It was the same for the Wise Men.  
The Star led them to a reality that changed all their ideas of what and who God  
is. Another poem, by T S Eliot imagines what this was like for them. Returning  
to their own country all they now saw was '*an alien people clutching their  
gods*'. They had been to a birth but it felt like a death.

One thing I see time and time again is that when people lose their faith it is because their understanding of God is too small, too managed and contained. They have filled the glasshouse of their spiritual imaginations and become imprisoned by their own definitions and limitations.

Faith withers and dies when we are too frightened to break through the spiritual structures we have built for ourselves. Structures which were once helpful, but now prevent growth.

We all inhabit fragile structures of our own construction, and we constantly need help in being liberated from them. Christ offers us that always surprising vision of God, enabling us to become the people he means us to be.

### **THIRD GIFT: PICTURE**

My third and final gift is 'The Snail' by Matisse.



I first spent time with it in the 2014 Tate Exhibition of his late work, and it has stayed with me ever since.

In his early seventies Matisse underwent a major operation that should have killed him – and it nearly did. In the long months of convalescence, the nuns who cared for him nicknamed him, '*La Resuscite*' – the 'man who rose from the dead'.

It was in this period after illness and his eventual death in 1954 that was to be the most productive of his life. Weakened by his operation, Matisse was no

longer able to stand and paint, and so he developed an entirely new medium called *gouaches decoupees*, in which he cut out coloured shapes that were glued onto canvas to form images.

He once said: *'Nothing is more difficult for a true painter than to paint a rose, since before he can do so, he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted.'* Like many people who have experienced their mortality, he was no longer interested in the surface appearance of things. As an artist, he was not trying to show was a rose or a snail looked like to the eye, but what it feels like to the heart.

Of this image Matisse commented:

*'I first of all drew the snail from nature, holding it. I became aware of an unrolling, I found an image in my mind purified of the shell, then I took the scissors'*

The title is misleading at first, suggesting something slow and ponderous, but here we see energy and emotion, and an eruption of light.

He seems to have found the essence of the thing, a form *'filtered to its essentials'*. Discovering the light, joy and colour that underlies, seeing it, perhaps, as God sees it.

Radiant, wonderful, and above all – loved.

The joy of this image is however not naiveté.

It was created by a sick man with less than a year to live following a long and painful illness.

Perhaps that explains the rectangle of black that is front and centre.

But it is still surrounded by colour and appears weightless, held in place by the light around it.

Out of this context, Matisse seems to have revealed the glory that underlies even the most mundane of creatures – a snail.

Epiphany means *'revealing'*.

It is a season when we try to glimpse the glory of God that underlies all things.

At the Wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned ordinary water into extraordinary wine, St John says that it *'revealed his glory'*.

A reality, and essence, that is the in-stress of all things

A former Dean of Westminster Abbey, Michael Mayne, wrote a series of letters to his grandchildren, and in one he says:

*'The Christian Gospel is about seeing with changed eyes. Those who write of the impact of Jesus upon them are saying: Look! Listen! A child is born, and a man dies, and in the story of that birth and that life, in images of water, and bread, in damaged lives healed and in people forgiven and set free, and on a wooden cross and in an upper room a new way of living becomes possible, a new creation is set in being, and a whole new understanding of God is revealed'.*

Perhaps you have your own gifts you wish to find and share at the start of 2018?

In any case, may this New Year, and this Epiphany be a revealing of glory that leads you into newness of life.