

The Epiphany 2021  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sermon by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks

---

I love these words from the Indian Christian tradition – that

“the real secret of Christmas is that  
my own heart – your heart –  
is the manger  
in which the birth of Christ  
takes place”.<sup>1</sup>

In this season of gifts as we recall the visit of the magi/kings, today is the Sunday when we begin four weeks of Epiphany – unwrapping the gifts of what Christmas really means. And in this strangest of New Years – pandemic, tiers, schools, Brexit mess – it is all the more important to think about our faith and how our faith sustains and strengthens us still.

Epiphany is not just one moment or event – the gifts of the Magi, beautiful, shining, symbolic as that is. Rather Epiphany: the word means a ‘revealing, showing out’ – a time for you and me to reflect on what this birth, this incarnation, “stoops heaven to earth”<sup>2</sup>, really means for you – that we might discover afresh in our hearts the gift of faith, and what that faith means for how we live in relationship with the people around us and the beautiful world we inhabit.

As well as exchanging gifts, this season is itself a gift.  
We wonder at the mystery of the precious gift of the “Word which existed ‘in the beginning’” – of the Word made flesh.  
We wonder at the gift of Life, God’s life, made visible – ‘epiphanied’ to us in the Christ-Child.  
At the gift of Light, God’s light, shining in whatever darkness we experience.  
At the gift of Christ, the Living Bread from heaven to sustain us on life’s journey.

At the gift of Jesus the Vine, who connects us to each other and to the creator God who brought all things into being.  
At the gift of the Good Shepherd and Guardian of souls, who lays down his life for us and our sins, and promises that all who come are never turned away.

That’s one of the Epiphany gifts – the lesson that we have to learn: the gift that we can’t do anything to earn God’s love: rather, in God’s lavish generosity, he embraces each one of us, no one lost to his love, and offers to each the gift of life and of eternal life. We can rejoice in that ‘life beyond life’ embracing our departed loved ones and the recently departed – †John Waine, James Attwell, Margaret Tebbit, Ian Hartley.

Eternal life isn’t some ‘post-death disembodied-spirit’ – which so many people today seem to assume is what Christians think ‘eternal life’ is. Rather eternal life can be right now – in the present – and continues beyond death, and will lead to extraordinary Resurrection Life – love beyond our imagining.

How to lead something of that ‘eternal life’ in the now? The often-quoted 1<sup>st</sup>-century Rabbi Hillel put it roughly like this: ‘don’t do to others what you wouldn’t have others do to you – that’s all you need to know about faith – the rest is just padding’.

These Epiphany weeks in the church calendar are here to help us pause and ask what our faith really means to us, what eternal life means to us – to ask those deeper questions: in this season of gifts, how will I use my life as a gift to others? What sort of person will I be? Who am I? What’s going on in my heart, here?

And as we ponder these things all we need to know, and tell others, about the Christian faith is simply this: that in the birth of the Christ-Child: our beautiful, creator God loves you – and says – now go: bring the gift of my love and life to those around you.

That's the Christian faith into which we and all the faithful departed were baptized.

That's the faith which The Epiphany tries to reveal to us.

That's the hope which has fed and nurtured people of faith – at its centre the story of Jesus – ‘the gift of love mending wounded hearts’ – Christ inviting us into lives of loving God, and having hearts of love, to serve and love neighbour.

So what will God reveal/‘epiphany’ to you at the start of this strangest of years. This is what was revealed to Julian of Norwich, one of our East Anglian saints, on the meaning of Christ’s birth:

*“I desired many times to know in what was our Lord's meaning.*

*I was answered, and it was said:*

*"Know it well, Love was his meaning.*

*Who reveals it to you? Love.*

*What did he reveal to you? Love.*

*Why does he reveal it to you? For Love.*

*Remain in this, and you will know more of the same – you will never know different, without end.”*

*So I was taught that Love is our Lord's meaning”<sup>3</sup>.*

So, despite the uncertainty of the year that lies ahead, yet may we know the strength and joy, healing and love of the Christ-Child. And as we pray for the world and its peoples, for ourselves and each other, may we with loving hearts know that true gift and secret of Christmas:

“your heart  
is the manger  
in which the birth of Christ  
takes place”.

Philip Banks Epiphany Sunday 2021

<sup>1</sup> quoted by Puan Bair, meditation teacher

<sup>2</sup> from Hymn of the Nativity, Richard Crashaw (1613-1649)

<sup>3</sup> The Revelation of Divine Love, ch86, Julian of Norwich (1343-c1416)



Taddeo di Bartolo (c.1362-1422), Adorazione dei Magi,  
National Gallery of Umbria, Perugia