

Epiphany

6 January

There we were, after the flames had danced above our heads
And the Spirit had poured himself over and through us.
Our Epiphany.
At last we got it. We knew, we understood
What all that terrifying mess was for;
The early summons by the sea,
The early excitement of something new, something different;
Someone new, someone different.
And how we flocked and followed,
Eager to see, eager to hear,
But always being thwarted by our lack of vision, lack of trust, even.
Be safe with what you know, the recalcitrant voice shouted in our heads,
And that fallback position wrestled constantly with the eagerness.

And the wandering, and the teaching, and the confusion, was all of a piece
All of a journey into the unknown,
Of stumbling suggestions, of wayward responses,
Of not quite having the courage to put your hand up
And be the first answer.
For you knew you would get it wrong.
You would always get it wrong.
Get thee behind me, Satan!

This was the pattern we followed,
Even when the crisis came upon us, up to and including
The alacritous response of the city
Before the baying crowd demanded blood;
Not even the mysterious supper could stop the inevitable.

And there we were at the foot of the cross
After the vaunted hope
And the thwarted ambition.
After the scattering of the sheep.
When called upon, we melted, like summer snow,
Like the will o' the wisps that we undoubtedly were.
All had gone wrong, terribly wrong.
We stood staring blankly.
Is this what love had come to? we silently asked.
Eagerness replaced by emptiness,
Loyalty and a sense of duty dissolving upwards into the night sky,
a hollow vacuum with a poisonous echo.
We trudged back, and then...

What? A new life? A resurrected man?
That's what the Magdalene said she saw in the garden,
And this is what froze us in the upper room.
But, in truth
This only led to more confusion, more furrowed brows, more anxiety.
What on earth going on?
Until, that is, the Spirit danced among us,
Shattering the stasis with unquenchable fire.
Our Epiphany.

And here I am. Here I am. This is where the light has led me.
To some strange land,
Brought here by the Spirit's promptings.
Go and make disciples! Go and make. Go!
And we have gone, in various directions, to see, to tell, to enthuse.
Philip, to the south, following the Ethiopian's train
Hotfoot to heat and sand, and possibly to jungle beyond.
Andrew, northwards bound, to mountain and forest,
To the shimmering of the skies, and the stillness of the frozen stars.
Peter, after a while, left for the West, to the City, the beating heart of empire
To sophisticated sounds and the vainglorious posturings of the noble,
To everything we connote with the word civilisation.
No doubt trying to play catch up with Saul,
The manic, intemperate Saul, who would always, always be one step ahead,
Writing about the significance of it all, the imperative of it all.
Full of light and enthusiasm.
James, ever the sensible one, stayed at home to keep the squabbling contained.

And I? To the East I am drawn.
Leaving the safety of my home, my customs, my rituals.
Knowing that, by standing still, these have already been challenged;
Matthew's scribblings saw to that, what with his dubious women
Tearing apart that hallowed lineage,
And with 'wise men from the East' being granted favoured status
By seeing him, by worshipping him first.
By seeing and being the Epiphany we so tried to see and be,
But which we didn't assume till much, much later,
Till we had gone through some kind of hell,
Why is it, for others, so seemingly effortless?

'Wise men from the East!'
And what is their wisdom?
The wisdom of the perfumed and the fragrant,
The wisdom of magic and of numbers,
The wisdom of the angel and the unlocking of the secrets of heaven,

Not the wisdom of our forefather, the wisdom of the book,
Of the practised, of the traditions of centuries, of the expected reckoning,
But something different,
Something quite different.

It is from here, from within our wisdom,
That he has been grafted on to our sensibilities,
And so he emerges from our security and our repose,
Consuming our safe recipes with his strange delights.
But this is how we will tell of him,
from within our safe house,
Exhorting others to taste and see that the Lord is good.
Our Lord. Our taste.
We are not quite ready to dispense with the old familiar ways.
Not just yet, anyway.

And so I journey on, leaving behind that security and that repose,
The atmosphere and the appearance,
And everything changes as I travel
Towards those strange cities,
Those spiced cities,
Extravagant cities,
Where people peer at me with darkened eyes,
Wearing exotic robes, listening to a different music
Apprehending a different god or gods.
Well, that is how it seems to me.

I stand there in my simplicity, at the heart of this alien world
Beguiled by its delights
As well as instinctively summoning a caution against over exposure.
I don't want what I have to bring to be too distilled by the fragrant air
Or overcome by caustic spices.

I stumble into the arena,
Holding my arm aloft,
Defining scroll waving before the bemused crowds.
'This is the way. This is the future,' I cry to unsuspecting ears
And eyes, whose indifference is, I may say, understandable.

And then, in my caution, I am aware
Of an old man watching me.
A man with sunken, lined eyes, a flowing white beard, a purple robe
Decorated with stars.
He is new to me, but I, I seem familiar to him.
Or rather, not me, but what I have become, am becoming.
His deep eyes see through to me, and I am caught by his gaze.

It is as if he has seen what I have seen, for there is a recognition,
Not of anything past remembered
But a new thing that we, different though we are, share.
A true re-cognition, that bridges the sandy, exotic distance, the different music, the
caustic spices.
He approaches with halting steps, and I wait for him.
And as he stands before me, his gaze never wavering,
He says in an accented version of my tongue,
Wearied but unbowed,
'What took you so long?'