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A Light to My Path (Isaiah 60. 1-6; Matthew 2. 1-12)

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It's become unfashionable in recent years, but I confess to being tempted still by the allure of making new year's resolutions. These days, for me, it's not so much about health and fitness, as about life management. This is the year I'll finally spend more time doing X or prioritising Y; it's the year I'll be more 'on top of things', less reactive to circumstance. Of course, I've learnt over the years – as I'm sure we all have – to hold my resolutions less tightly, more compassionately and realistically. And in fact, I don't really think of them as goals to achieve so much as expressions of orientation. My 'resolutions' reflect my desire at new year to attain perspective on how I'm living my life; they're my attempt to step back and see a larger picture, so as to discern and commit to wiser, more effective action.

This year, however, I've found it difficult to take that step back – to glimpse that wider perspective. It's a bit like I'm too close to see things whole, to see the fuller context of the path I'm treading. I know this could signify a problem – a lack of insight, for example, a lack of differentiation; but I sense it's not just that. American writer Rebecca Solnit offers an image that seems to express something of my experience of lacking a significant vantage point. She's writing about walking in mountains, and notes that the form of a mountain is best seen at distance. She points to Japanese artist Hokusai's famous *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, in thirty-five of which 'the perfect cone of Mount Fuji' is depicted whole, looming either 'largely nearby or small far away, giving orientation and continuity to city, road, field, and sea'. There's just one exception in this series of views. 'Only in the print of pilgrims actually ascending the mountain does the familiar shape that unites the other prints vanish'.

And she comments, 'When we are attracted, we draw near; when we draw near, the sight that attracted us dissolves; the face of the beloved blurs or fractures as one draws near for a kiss, the smooth cone of Mount Fuji becomes rough rock rising from underfoot to blot out the sky in Hokusai's print of the mountain pilgrims. The objective form of the mountain seems to dissolve into subjective experience, and the meaning of walking up a mountain fragments'.¹ In other words, there comes a point in the pilgrimage when we're no longer looking *at* the mountain, but we're *in* it. Are we lost? Are we lacking in perception or orientation? Or are we on the way to a new vantage point, to the possibility of seeing from, rather than looking towards, that which has drawn us on?

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany and Epiphany means appearing, revealing or manifesting. Its key symbol is light; its key metaphors are vision, clarity, comprehension. With the coming of Christ, so the gospels proclaim, the light of God shines into the world, piercing the darkness, enabling all peoples to see (as St Paul put it) 'what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things' (Eph. 3.9). 'In your light, we see light', wrote the psalmist. Epiphany celebrates the faith that it's possible, in and through Christ, to see what is with ever-increasing clarity and widening perspective, to attain a more holistic vision, the view from the mountaintop.

In the gospel of Matthew, epiphany is attached to the story of the wise men or magi – star-gazers from the East. 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' these travellers inquire of King Herod in Jerusalem. 'For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage' (Matthew 2. 2). This story references the vision, centuries earlier, of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had imagined the restoration of God's people in terms of the regathering of those dispersed by exile, the coming of a new and just king and the tribute of the nations. 'Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms ... the

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), pp.137-138.

abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you' (Isaiah 60.4-5).

But whereas in Isaiah's vision, those who bring tribute from the East will bring only 'gold and frankincense' (Isaiah 60.6) on their multitude of camels, the gospel depicts a third offering to the infant Christ – myrrh – the perfume used for embalming the dead. And whereas Isaiah imagines the glory of God shining over Jerusalem, the nations coming to Zion's light 'and kings to the brightness of your dawn', Matthew's light appears far from the centre of power, in the fragile glow of a distant star. According to the gospels, the light of Christ does indeed shine in the darkness, but the scene is significantly more shadowed than Isaiah's triumphant and once for all dispelling of the gloom. And this suggests that like the metaphor of pilgrimage, the metaphor of enlightenment has different faces and can point to different aspects of the human journey into God.

Sometimes the coming or dawning of the light is felt as definitive arrival, the final triumph of goodness over evil and clarity over confusion. Like Simeon in last week's gospel reading, who rejoiced at beholding the infant Jesus, knowing that at last he sees truly and sees whole: 'now my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2. 30-32). Or like John the Baptist who testifies to having seen 'the Spirit descending' on Jesus at the Jordan, telling those around him that 'I myself did not know him' but now 'I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God' (John 1. 32-34).

But it's not always like this. Sometimes the process of enlightenment can be experienced subjectively as a kind of darkening or blindness. Like the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration, confused and terrified by Jesus' dazzling face and garments (Luke 9. 29, 32-33), or St Paul, felled by light on his way to Damascus (Acts 9.3), literally blinded for three days and metaphorically in the dark as to the meaning of his epiphany – perhaps for as long as 14 years (Galatians 2.1); his unknowing yielding only very gradually to a wholly different kind of awareness, and a rare

perception of what he called 'the breadth and length and height and depth' of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3.18-19).

And sometimes, in the Scriptures, the light offered the one who seeks after God seems vanishingly dim, like the star followed by the magi. In Christmas cards it's depicted as unmistakably bright, but in the text - well, who knows? Perhaps it was just enough to light the way, enough for the next step, the next night's journeying, 'a lantern to my feet and a light to my path' (Ps. 119. 105) as the psalmist puts it.

And I wonder where you feel yourself to be as we celebrate Epiphany and enter into this new year? Do you have a sense of clarity, of seeing deeper or seeing more? Do you find yourself on a mountain summit or at least a look out, able to gaze back at where you've come from and orient yourself to what lies ahead? Or is there more of a sense of being in the midst of a large landscape or a dark night – eyes straining to see your way, the destination (if there is one) out of sight, obscured by an immensity within or without which affords little perspective on where you are and where you're being led?

If you're like me, you prefer a clear line of sight. But our tradition testifies that the spiritual life involves, of necessity, times when we lose vision, clarity, perspective. If our whole way of seeing is to be changed, then illumination will often blind before it enlightens; if our journey is to lead us beyond what we know and who we think are, then the way will sometimes be lost before it's found. Rebecca Solnit writes: 'In a labyrinth one can be farthest from the destination when one is closest; on a mountain ... the mountain itself changes shape again and again as one ascends'.² The important thing is just to keep going, though, as St Michael of Leunig put it, stopping for a rest every now and again. So as we gather in this new year to commit ourselves anew to Christ's Way, let us pray for the grace – like the magi – to keep faith with whatever light it is that draws us on. And may this year be a blessing to you all!

² Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p.137.