

St Chad's Church, Ladybarn.
The Feast of the Epiphany 2013.

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Sunday 6th January 2013.

The star they had seen rising went ahead of them until it stopped.
St Matthew 2: 9&10.

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Human beings are compulsive storytellers, and every story we tell is a story about something. A story always has a point, otherwise the listener is disappointed,

And of no book of stories is that more true than of the Bible. Each of its hundreds of stories has a point to it, and that point is like to be a doctrine, a teaching that's important for our mental and spiritual health.

So what about the Christmas and Epiphany stories?

What's the point, what's the doctrine or teaching, behind the stories of the Star of Bethlehem; Herod, the brutal king, or the magi from Rome's rival, the Parthian Empire? What have they to do with your mental and spiritual health and mine?

The answer is in St John's summary of all the Christmas stories in one crisp phrase:

And the Word became flesh.

The point? That Christmas is about the end of humanity's greatest spiritual problems, *alienation*.

I don't think I really understood what the word *alienation* meant until at theological college in 1959 I was given as my pastoral assignment, visiting the 'British Council' in Liverpool and becoming a student among foreign students.

It was an education, because most of the students I met from abroad were Communists, a few were card carrying, but many were decidedly communist in their sympathies.

At Christmas 1959, I invited one of them, a physics' student, let us call him AB, to spend Christmas with us at my parents' house.

AB was polite, immensely able, and with excellent English.

The highlight of his visit for my mother, whom he saw as a symbol of British motherhood, was the speech he made over the Christmas pudding about Russian motherhood and the ending of capitalism's alienation of oppressed workers like my father.

When he finished, he presented her with a shiny model of Sputnik, to mark the end of world-wide worker alienation through the teachings of Marx and Lenin.

My mother had a great time. I, on the other hand, was hard-pressed by his attempts to make a communist out of me.

How could I, the son of workers be studying for a reactionary, bourgoise institution like the church. I was betraying my class. I was a classic case of alienation!

'You know about alienation,' he asked. I did and I showed him my copies of Marx and Lenin and Mao Tse Tung's little book, *On the Elimination of Contradiction Among the People*.

As a good member of *Komosol*, The Young Communist League, AB had attended classes in atheism, and learned all about how workers were alienated, that is estranged, distanced and divorced from the means of production.

I explained that Christians also believed in alienation, only we called it *sin*, the spiritual condition of being divorced from God, separated from other human beings, divided against ourselves.

Well, he didn't convert me and I didn't convert him, and the Cold War being what it was, we lost touch. I often wonder what happened to him when Communism collapsed as a result of its becoming alienated from the needs and interests of the Russian people.

In much the same way, I might add, as the Church of England has become distanced and divorced from the needs and interests of the English people. We are becoming an alienated church.

The star they had seen rising went ahead of them until it stopped. The Magi, from which we get our word magician, were almost certainly not Jews but gentiles, Parthians, from what is now Iran.

And the Parthians were old enemies of Rome, and as such would have made the Roman puppet Herod very nervous. And because Jews were Jews and the Parthians were Zoroastrians, Jews and Parthians were also alienated in religion.

Their importance for St Matthew is that the Magi were also astrologers who searched the night sky for comets and other signs that something important was happening in history.

Now, Jews at that time were having trouble with the night sky. They felt alienated from it; as if heaven itself was closed.

In Isaiah chapter 64 verse 1, the prophet is so disturbed by the silence of heaven that he appeal directly to God to end our alienation from nature and he calls out: O that you would rend the heavens and come down.

In the journey of the Magi, St Matthew is telling us that in the birth of Jesus that was what happened. The alienation of Heaven and Earth was over.

And because the Magi were gentiles, non-Jews, the birth of the Messiah was also the end of Jewish/ gentile alienation, which is why we gentiles now belong to the church.

That Christmas, AB and I disagreed about a lot of things, but not over alienation. We just saw it differently. For him it was economic, for me, alienation was at root spiritual. Economics was just one sphere among many in which it manifested itself.

When St Luke tells us about the visit of the Temple Shepherds and their vision of the heavenly host, where they see, as it were, into heaven itself; he too is telling us that the alienation, the divorce in nature, between heaven and earth, between God and human kind, is now over.

When Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union and the economy moved over to a version of capitalism. Many of the old party bosses used their position to make themselves billionaires out of what, until then, had been state property.

Their new found wealth alienated them from the Russian people and they moved to London to get away from taxes and buy themselves football clubs.

Meanwhile, British millionaires became alienated from British society in a similar sort of way, and to avoid paying tax like the rest of us, went to live abroad or invest their money there.

It was all perfectly legal; but a a sin all the same, because of the alienation involved.

Once we've spotted it, emotional and spiritual alienation is everywhere.

Why was there looting in last year's riots? Because so many people felt alienated from the rest of us.

We are not only alienated from God and society; we can also be alienated from ourselves. Cut off from themselves in tremendous inner battles, many people self-harm.

One of my voluntary jobs in retirement is to act as a mentor in a High School, where they give me lads who are alienated from school or education in general!

In rare cases, they are even alienated from football. As for maths, that illustrates one of the chief causes for you and I being put-off anything, *fear!*

So I tell them the story about the great German mathematician, Karl Frederic Gauss, who, when he was 12, was challenged by his teacher to add up all the numbers between 1 and 100 in his head.

One plus two, makes three; then add three, which makes six, and then add four all the way up to adding 99 and then a 100.

'You can do it in under two minutes just as he did', I say.

'No way', they reply. 'I can't do maths.'

'There's a trick, a short cut', I tell them. 'There usually is in maths!' And the trick is to start at one, and go up the numbers, one at a time, adding them to the numbers at the other end as they come down one a time.'

'So add one to the a hundred'. '101 they say.

'Then go up to 2, and down to 99. And add the 2 to the 99'. They say,' 101'.

'Now, let's try, 3 and 98.' 101', they say.

'And 4 and 97.' 'It's always 101,' they say.

'Until they meet half way', I tell them. 'And what number's half way between 1 and 100.'

'Fifty!'

'So there are 50 one hundred and ones! What's that make?'

They begin to panic. I give them a hint.

'What's 50 times one hundred?'

'Fifty hundred! No, 5,000', they answer.

'Don't forget the 50 ones.

'Five thousand and fifty,' they say in disbelief.

That was under two minutes', I say. And off they rush to tell their mates, their girlfriend and their long-suffering maths teach.

In two minutes they became a little bit less afraid of maths and therefore a little less alienated.

Just as St Matthew and St Luke hoped that knowing that the sky is no longer spiritually closed, we will be less alienated from creation.

And knowing how pagan gentiles paid homage to Jesus we will be less prejudiced against other religions and cultures and less alienated therefore from our neighbours.

To overcome fear is to overcome alienation. This is how the stories of Christmas minister to our mental health.

It's why St John's summary of the nativity, *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us;* that is men and women are no longer alienated from God, becomes in his first letter, *perfect love casts out fear.*

Christmas means that human sin as alienation from God, from nature, from other people and ourselves, is over.

And if you and I can enter that truth, spiritually, emotionally and intellectually, our mental health should be the better for it.

So in this service, let's examine our hearts and minds, our prayers and attitudes, our thoughts and feelings to find out where we are most alienated, remembering that fear is always an important clue.

Wherever you and I are afraid, it's there we are alienated, separated, cut-off, divorced. And it won't only be in maths, or in my case football and dancing. .

Whatever it is, that's the part of us that most needs to fathom the truth of the Christmas and Epiphany story.

Where you and I are afraid, that's still where we are waiting for the redemption that's the end of alienation and better mental health

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