

The Second Sunday of Epiphany – January 20th, 2008

*What lights up your mind and forms
the architecture of your thoughts?*

The season of Epiphany asks the question: “What on earth are we here for?” Epiphany is the time when we allow our imaginations to be touched – “enlightened” -- by the stories we tell and the table around which we gather. The architecture of our minds, hearts – our thoughts and emotional responses to life – is formed by the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences. Think, for a moment, about what *plays on* and *illuminates* your mind. Think about what is happening to the minds and hearts of those who live with the thought that they might be blown up if they go to the market for food! Think about Humair Bilour who was quoted in the New York Times on Friday in the context of the threat of violence by militants in Peshawar, Pakistan. "People go to the bazaar and make jokes: 'Is this going to be my last trip?' " Think what that does to your whole life. It becomes the lens through which you look at the world. Your fear *lights up* the world.

Our faith is such a lens. We *choose* the eye-glasses through which we look at the world (or they are chosen for us). How we are in the world is a matter of choosing, of vocation. In the Gospel (John 1:29-42) we read of the call of Jesus to be the Christ! And the call to us to follow in the form of an invitation -- *Come and see!* “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. . . The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they *followed* Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "*What are you looking for?*" They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said to them, "*Come and see.*" This season of Epiphany challenges us with two questions: *What am I looking for? And What on earth am I here for?*

The answer to these often unspoken questions will depend on the images that capture our attention. Our lives are shaped by our longings and fears (by whatever hold our imagination captive). The Christian vision is that we are defined *not only* by our longing for God but by God's longing for us! Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev wrote: "Man without God is no longer Man." Humanity without God is not yet truly human. And I treasure two sayings from the ancient tradition: "The Glory of God is a human being fully alive!" And, "It was necessary for man [for us] to be sanctified by the humanity of God." The Eastern Church teaches that a fully human being is made up of Body, Mind and Holy Spirit. This was and is the anthropology of the early church. This vision informed the imagination of the followers of Christ.

So! We are *called* to be human! It's a vocation. It doesn't just happen! The trouble is that we come with no instruction book or owner's manual. Who we are and who we are called to be always seems up for grabs. Our pets - our dogs and cats - don't seem to suffer from crises of identity (although I understand that there are pet therapists now). Trees and mountains get on with being trees and mountains without trauma. But we are thrown into existence with no blue-print, and we look for some way to inject some meaning into our lives. Religion, politics, philosophy become the play ground - a very dangerous one - for our trying to discover what we're *for*. Our early experiences and how we interpret them become the lens through which we look at life.

So, think for a moment about what feeds your imagination! What plays on your mind? What pushes your buttons? Fear? Poverty? Terrorism? Recession and depression (both economic and personal)? Chaos? New strains of Bacteria? Cosmic rot? The imagination has a field day in the glory and chaos of the world. What forms the architecture of your thoughts? What affects not only *what* you think but the *way* you think? Is the world a hostile place? Is everyone a potential enemy, rival? Or, is everyone a mystery to be respected? Yes - sometimes untrustworthy but a mystery nevertheless.

Let's move from Pakistan ("People go to the bazaar and make jokes: 'Is this going to be my last trip?' ") to Naples, Italy. Have you heard about the garbage strike? Now there's an picture to haunt the imagination! Elena Ferrante writes from Naples: "At night the mice and the dogs are masters. The garbage is piled up to the second floor of the houses, and in the darkness it comes alive. Plastic bags and sacks vibrate, emitting the sounds of things pulled apart, scavenged. . . The garbage — thousands of tons of it — has gone uncollected for three weeks, because all the available landfills are full. The evil odor of decomposition and burning waste moves down the hills of refuse and slides along the streets, enters shops, doorways, houses. But this city, a million people, keeps going. What makes people angry the . . . general acquiescence of Naples, the habit of surviving in inefficiency and disorder. Crime, in this city, has become a destiny; it has the power of things that are well known but about which there is nothing to be done."ⁱ The city falling apart - any city anywhere --- has become an image that infects our imagination, with crime, pollution and decay experienced as destiny.

Thank God, there are *other* things going on to capture our imaginations. They give us hope by giving us a clue about who we are where we might be going. I am often very critical of our culture but one thing gives me hope -- there are some fine movies being made - from *The Kite Runner* to the dark but moving movie, *The Savages*. There's also the masterly adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*. We are fortunate to be able to enjoy excellent movies, which feed the imagination, wake the sleeping soul and show us something of the truth.

Take the movie *THERE WILL BE BLOOD* -- adapted from the 1927 novel *OIL!* by Upton Sinclair. The story centers on a character Daniel Plainview, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, who starts out as a driven and hard-working silver miner and finds oil. Fast forward a few years and he's a shrewd oil man, who has made a fortune and will step on anyone to get what he wants. Daniel Plainview sees the world as a hostile place full of stupid people who aren't to be trusted. His imagination is diseased. The architecture of his thoughts has been constructed over the years by the fact

that he hates people and thinks most of us are lazy and ignorant. The maddening thing is that he needs other people in order to gain power and make money. But for all his hard work, the demonic shape of his imagination takes its toll. The demons begin to get to him. He says to one of his companions:

"I have a competition in me. *I want no one else to succeed.* I hate most people. . . There are times when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking. I want to earn enough money so that I can get away from everyone. . . I see the worst in people. I don't need to look past seeing them to get all I need. I want to rule and never, ever explain myself. I've built my hatreds up over the years, little by little . . ."

And so it is with all of us. I pray not with hatreds, but we too have build the shape of our minds and hearts over the years. So, what kind of human beings are we called to be? We can't avoid the issue of vocation There's no neutral position. "What on earth am I here for?" We live in this question whether we acknowledge it or not.

This season of Epiphany presents us with images that restore, heal and give hope: the readings are all about the *call* to be human. In Isaiah 49:1-7 we read of the call of the prophet! "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me." God calls you too! How far have you tried to drown out that voice calling you?

And, in 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 we read about the *call* of Paul to be an apostle! "Paul, *called* to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." And, the Gospel is about the call to Jesus to be Jesus! "When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi", "where are you staying?" He said to them, "*Come and see.*" Like the disciples, we have to come and see. We have to take that first step into the unknown.

Something has captured your imagination? What is it? I think of Winston Churchill's depression. He called it his "black dog". Harry Potter has his allegorical "Grimm".

Whatever you call it, a vast number of us suffer from intense unhappiness, despair, self-loathing and hopelessness. Nor does this specter seem to fall into any one demographic category. People who are otherwise extremely successful, fulfilled and functional are just as likely to suffer as those whose life circumstances might provide all the necessary explanation for the condition blithely called "depression." Some distinguish between mere "black feelings" and a "clinical" depression characterized by a lack of feeling. Regardless, a very great percentage of us suffer from such thoughts and feelings. We are held captive by images. But note Churchill's humor – "I may be a worm but I fancy I'm a glow worm!"

So, what forms the architecture of your thoughts? What lights up and plays on your mind? Allow these stories, allow this sacrament, to heal your imagination. Remember the words of St. Augustine, as he held up the bread of the Eucharist: "Be what you see! Receive who you are!" Allow some good news to penetrate with healing light the darknesses inside you! Look to Jesus as the Christ to find out what to be human. If you don't choose him, you will choose or be chosen by something else. The "vocation" of many today seems to be predatory, tribal, frightened, bigoted, domineering – like Daniel Plainview in the movie *There Will Be Blood*. The temptation for us is always to opt for safety, to choose something smaller than that which God has in mind for us. The vision of the safe and manageable self is summed up in the vocation to be "Me!" It sounds good but underneath are shallow patterns of merely private fulfillment. We look for things which give us permission to stay small, contained and satisfied.ⁱⁱ Our beliefs too are many and trivial. For example, when someone says, "This is my *belief!*" we're supposed to be impressed and maintain a respectful silence no matter how absurd or ill-founded the belief is. "I have a right to my opinion!" Of course you do but it just might be worthless!

Freedom of belief is one of our entitlements. And that's right but it doesn't follow that any belief – however absurd, and especially if the person is sincere – has legitimacy. How many here think we should respect other people's beliefs?! Hands up! It is taken for granted in our

culture. But think about it for a moment. Should we, without reservation, respect other people's beliefs? I think not – some beliefs are vile. Curtis White writes, "It's as if we were each our own foreign country and we wanted to know what the people in the land of Ken or Brenda or Eduardo believe. How quaint their curious customs! How fascinating their rituals!" All very private. Religion as hobby – "I'm Catholic and love to hike" – or "I'm a Baptist and collect stamps." "I'm Jewish and love to dance." "I'm Muslim and love tennis." We "respect" beliefs so long as they don't make a difference, don't actually impinge on real everyday life. But that's not the way the world really works -- ideas matter and the world is a battle ground of warring stories and images. What are you looking for? What on earth are you here for?

Are you going to be like Daniel Plainview? Are we to respect his beliefs – honor the terrible darkness that took over his mind? I think not. ("There are times when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking. I want to earn enough money that I can get away from everyone. . . . I see the worst in people. I don't need to look past seeing them to get all I need. I want to rule and never, ever explain myself. I've built my hatreds up over the years, little by little . . .") Or will you respond to the call of God to a fullness of humanity where your longing for God and God's longing for you meet – as they meet in this sacrament.

It's hard for the message to get through because we think (believers and unbelievers alike) we know what this season of epiphany is about. The non-religious think, at best, that it's a fairy tale; at worst, a dangerous delusion. "There exists a widespread belief that as people become more modern they become less religious; that the ongoing growth of human knowledge contributes to the development of human reason, with the result that societies become ever more secular. Religion retreats as science advances, and the end point of this process will be a world in which the traditional faiths of humankind disappear. . . . Religion, in this view, is not the expression of a primary human need; it is the by-product of ignorance, or else the result of poverty or political repression." [John Grayⁱⁱⁱ] If only we'd all wake up religion would wither away. We now have our

evangelical atheists who long for a pure secular civilization. But they underestimate the resilience of longing in the human heart – the lure of the stories of Christmas and Epiphany. Never underestimate how our longings and fears can get us into trouble. Neither should we underestimate the undertow of nihilism which follows in the wake of atheism.

In “A Thanksgiving,” written near the end of his life, W.H. Auden describes his slow conversion to religion – he’d seen what the Daniel Plainviews make of this world.

Finally, hair-raising things
That Hitler and Stalin were doing
Forced me to think about God.
Why was I sure they were wrong?
Wild Kierkegaard, Williams and Lewis
Guided me back to belief.

Belief is about choosing. Being human is a vocation – a calling – and you have to choose. If you don’t choose it will be chosen for you. Our life is the drama of the soul’s choice. That’s partly the reason so many of us show up here every week, some of us every day. There’s something here we want. It’s crazy to believe. Crazier not to believe. Believing seems silly but *the militant secularization of liberal thought cripples the soul*. It cripples us with distraction and entertainment. It cripples us by taking away our critical faculties. The tragic thing is that for many their vocation (as false as it is) means diminishment: perhaps our biggest problem, however, is that we want the world (our world) to be small and manageable? We’d rather be distracted than fully alive. Anything but face the boredom – boredom is when nothing is happening inside us.

What are you looking for? What on earth are you here for? When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “*What are you looking for?*” They said to him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” He said to them, “*Come and see.*” Our lives are shaped by our longings and the Christian vision is that we are defined not only by our longing for God but by God’s longing for us!

- “Man without God is no longer Man.” Humanity without God is not yet human.
- “The Glory of God is a human being fully alive!”
- “It was necessary for us to be sanctified by the humanity of God.”

So, come to the altar, for the healing of your imagination and the delight of your soul. Be what you see! Receive who you are!

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ⁱ *Our Fetid City* by ELENA FERRANTE – NYT, January 15, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Curtis White in *Harper's* (December 2007 p. 13ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Gray, “Faith In Reason: Secular Fantasies of a Godless Age” in *Harpers*, January 2008, p. 85 ff.