

Talk for January 6th 2008: Epiphany.

Today is Epiphany. Traditionally, it's the day we commemorate the wise men as they journeyed to find Jesus. We think of their joy when they finally found him; and we realize that they had to change the course of their return journey after they were warned that although Herod and the religious leaders in Jerusalem appeared to know all about God's plan for salvation, they weren't exactly working in everyone's – especially Jesus' – best interests.

It's a story of faith, guidance, miss-guidance, revelation and a literal, as well as figurative, change of direction.

The story of the wise men could be an analogy for the journey of faith that everyone who earnestly seeks to know Jesus and to follow him must make.

I'd like to tell you a little about my faith journey and the events that brought me to where I am today.

I used to think Christianity was all about following rules, looking 'pious', and generally 'being good'. Which is something I can do every day... right up to the point at which I wake up!

When I was 15, I decided to become a nun. I read all the nun books I could find, including the lives of the saints. St. Bernadette was my favourite. The only thing I learned from all this reading was that nuns creep about quietly, looking pious and closing doors softly. After the third or fourth time I startled my family by creeping into the living room and saying 'hello', my dad said, "Enough of this nunsense, find something else to do!"

So I gave up everything, except the pious attitude, which must have driven folks to distraction as I sat at the dinner table, waiting until everyone was chowing down, and then meekly folded my hands, bowed my head and said... absolutely nothing, to God.

I had fallen into the trap of false piety, which is easy to do unless we have a good understanding of what it is to be fully, authentically and deeply committed to a loving relationship with God and with Jesus Christ, our Saviour, friend and mentor.

When we commit our lives to Christ we are called to be what Jonathan calls 'pickled'. Not just dipped, sprinkled or dabbled, but fully immersed in Jesus' love and our response to his saving grace, for the rest of our lives. Growing in understanding and intentionally seeking his will for us. Learning more and more about who he is, and about who we are in him.

I'll repeat that: Growing in understanding and intentionally seeking his will for us. Learning more and more about who he is, and about who we are in him.

In order to do this we have to have an understanding of who we are as human beings, made in the image of God, and trying to live up to our ideals – our goals, dreams and hopes of what we want to do, or become. We also need to understand who we are in relationship to God and to each other.

That wasn't a problem when I was a child!

At five years of age I had a realistic grasp of who Jesus is – "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." I believed this and I told anyone who would listen about Jesus' love. I read my Bible in pictures, and basked in the fact that Jesus loved me, scuffed knees, messed up hair, untidy room and all.

Then I grew up – I was eight years old, and went to the local Church of England Sunday School. There they told me I had to learn the catechism. That was easy for me, I attended drama school and had to learn acres of poetry every day. The catechism, the Eucharist, most of the things in the Book of Common Prayer were a snap. And I got accolades. I also learned to recite the appropriate part of the BCP mechanically, word perfect, but with my mind elsewhere. The downside was that if I flubbed a word someone would tell me off in no uncertain terms. So I recited in fear, afraid that God wouldn't love me any more if I forgot the words.

I knew somehow that this wasn't right, but what was I to do? I still had my Bible, a 'real' one this time, no pictures, but I hardly ever opened it. I was losing my heart connection with God. But I only had an eight-year-old's grasp of what that meant.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: 11, (NIV) When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an *adult* I put childish ways behind me." (*Italics: my paraphrase*)

I'm not a child now, so I know Jesus doesn't want my mechanical self. He doesn't want me to worship him out of fear of retribution. He needs me to read my Bible and pray, earnestly seeking him and his will for me as I try to connect his word with my life as it is now.

"Forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:13-14, NIV) I have discovered that 'growing up' is a process that lasts well beyond childhood.

When I was twelve, I changed Sunday schools. Still Church of England, but much more 'user friendly'. We learned about Jesus, his love for us, and what that meant in our lives. We were encouraged to give our lives to Jesus. We also memorized Bible verses, but not for accolades (more for winning points against the opposing team!) One verse finally spoke to me "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8) and I said: "Here am I. Send me." I went forward at the altar call, and said 'yes' to Jesus.

The joy of salvation lasted... About 30 minutes! At which point our Sunday School teacher took us to one side and explained the new rules, now that we were Christians. NO pierced ears, NO high heel shoes, NO makeup, but above all NO going to the movies – straight to hell for us if we did! Well, the dress code was bad enough – we had to dress like her? But to give up our Saturday matinee, that would be hard. We gave it our best shot, until one day we saw our teacher coming out of the cinema at the end of a show. What? If she couldn't keep the rules how could we?

Two things happened then. She lost control of the class, and I pushed the boundaries. I nearly broke my neck trying to walk in stiletto heels. And a friend and I went to the cinema to see if God really would zap us. The movie was 'The Ten Commandments', I think we were hedging our bets, just in case. All we got was a stiff neck from sitting in the front row for 3 hours! However, once again I had lost 'my Jesus'. I became a rule breaker, without any sense of why the rules were unmanageable, and what salvation really meant.

Breaking the rules didn't give me freedom; it just ensnared me in rebellion. I'd stopped growing spiritually. My prayers weren't even the mechanical sort, and I lacked direction – Spiritual Direction.

Spiritual direction is a means of meeting with a mentor, or a group, to work out how we can grow into our authentic selves, as children of the living God. As Paul says, we should: "Continue to work out *our* salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in *us* to will and to act according to his good purpose." Phil. 2:12-13 NIV (*Italics my paraphrase*). Not afraid of God, as I was becoming, but with reasonable awe, tempered with love and understanding and assisted by someone who will come alongside to encourage and challenge us as we matured as Christians. And in the safety of a group of trusted friends with whom we can share our struggles and successes. True Christian community.

I know that now, but I didn't back then, so I dropped out of all authentic worship and distanced myself from God and from my friends.

Then came the 'nun' phase (don't go there). And the Sunday School teacher phase (Yes, I still tried to please God by doing 'holy stuff'). And the nurse phase (No time for God, I was busy helping people.) Then came the wife and mommy phase and my final battle with God. The rules had become unbearable. I shook my fist at God and said, "If that's Christianity, you can keep it!"

I think he said, "Well, now we're getting somewhere!" But my struggle with him lasted 15 years. At the end I was exhausted, and said "God, this isn't working, show me what to do."

God acted quickly. Within two hours I had met a colleague, and answered his question, "How was your Christmas?" truthfully. "It was awful." I had tried to make Christmas perfect, but it was still meaningless. Lorne, my colleague, said "I know what you're going through, there is help." And he invited me to go with him to a meeting later that week. The people at the meeting talked about a loving and forgiving God and about Jesus who died for our sins and wants to help us with our lives. This sounded like the Jesus I knew when I was 5. I was intrigued, but I wondered – when would the downside come... It didn't!

I continued to go to the meetings, and with the help of this group I was able to take an honest look at myself and a realistic look at God, Jesus and salvation. Yes, Jesus still loved me!

I found myself on my way to an honest relationship with God, Jesus, myself and others. I had started my new life, and the change was radical. So radical that my family and friends noticed, and started asking me why I was changing. (Strangely enough, some of them didn't like the changes they saw in me, and tried to make me change back).

I needed to know much more about this loving and forgiving God, so I started to go to my local Anglican Church on Sunday mornings. I found that the people there were authentic. Brave enough to be real and to share their faith with me. I learned to read my Bible to find out what it really said, and how I could apply what I learned to my life.

I learned to pray, not just mouthing the words, but opening my heart to God. I learned to listen and to find out what he wanted for my life rather than telling him what I thought he needed to do.

I also learned to be part of a Christian community. I made new friends, joined some groups and found a spiritual director, all of which required trust. Them of me, me of them, and all of us to trust and love Jesus.

I slowly grew in my new relationship with God. I actually enjoy worshipping him now, and communion is much more relevant to me. I come to church because I want to (even when I don't feel like it), because Christianity is not a feeling, it's a relationship.

I'm reconciling my private life to what I believe. I don't need to wear a mask of false piety in public any more because my heart is being conformed to God's will. I'm trying to 'walk my talk', but this is not without struggle. I'm learning to be more transparent, admitting when I'm wrong and seeking guidance and honest comment to keep me on track.

That's my story – I'm not saying that your life should look like mine, or that your faith journey should be the same as mine. I just wanted you to know how I got to be where I am now, and how I continue to struggle and grow in Christ. And how, just like the wise men I have had to learn to recognize true guidance, reject false information, and to change course from time to time as Jesus continues to reveal himself to me, and to lead me to where, and who, he wants me to be.

Conclusion:

So if you find yourself in the position at the start of the New Year where you can also affirm that: "my story of faith is one of guidance, miss-guidance, revelation and a literal, as well as figurative, change of direction" then together we can thank God for an authentic Epiphany. Living as a worshipper of Jesus Christ does not make our lives tidy, but it does make sense of our lives, and then they become truly wonder-ful, and wonder-filled!

I think Samuel Crossman who wrote the words to our gradual hymn knew this when he penned these stirring words:

My Song is Love Unknown

My song is love unknown
The Savior's love for me
Love to the loveless shown
That they might lovely be
For who am I that in my place
My Lord should take frail flesh and die

Verse 2

My soul is love unbound
For love has conquer'd death
And love the vict'ry won
In this His parting breath
For with the cry that all is done
Vain darkness fell before the Son

Verse 3

My song is love enthroned
Where angel voices raise

To magnify the Son
And sing the Father's praise
So shall I stand in glorious throng
And add my praises to that song