14th January 2018: Choral Matins
The Second Sunday of Epiphany
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Divine Epiphanies: ‘In Christ Alone?’


How do you express the inexpressible? How do you contain within time and space the intimations of the God who created and surpasses them? How do we communicate to others those fleeting moments of God’s presence?

That’s the challenge we are exploring this month in our Divine Epiphanies sermon series, through artefacts from world religions currently on display in the Ashmolean’s thought-provoking ‘Imagining the Divine’ exhibition.
Today’s artefact takes us to an unassuming Dorset village, Hinton St Mary, where one ordinary-seeming day in 1963 the village blacksmith was digging a post-hole. His spade jammed against something hard and, much to his surprise, he discovered an array of tiny tesserae, little blocks of mosaic; that when fully recovered and restored would turn out to be a pavement of some 28 feet by 20', spreading across two rooms.

In the first was a typical portrayal of the mythical Greek hero, Bellerophon, sitting astride Pegasus, ready to plunge his spear into the goat-head of the fantastical chimera. Around it were hunting scenes, a vegetal pattern and a twisting circle and rectangles of guilloche, the decorative double-plait. This was an amazing discovery, a hint of a much larger Roman villa that, with the associated finds and the hair-style of Bellerophon, could reasonably be dated to somewhere between 350 and 400.

However, what was to be found in the second room would propel this humble provincial mosaic by the local Dorset workshop into Radio 4’s ‘History of the World in 100 Objects’. For there, in a second slightly smaller roundel, was one of the earliest non-narrative images of Christ ever discovered.

It is of course not the Christ that most of us will have summoned to our mind’s eye as we worshipped this morning. This is a Christ pre-dating much of the classic medieval iconography, a young beardless figure, far more familiar to those who have explored the frescoes of the Catacombs of San Callisto or wandered through the fourth-century sarcophagi in the Vatican Museum. This is Christ cast in the guise of Apollo, albeit with a rather unfortunate cleft chin which my old colleague Eamonn Duffy famously mocked as more like ‘Desperate Dan’ than Jesus.

Despite a certain amount of academic effort to suggest otherwise over the years, Toynbee’s initial assertion that this is Jesus is almost certainly right – the Chi-Rho, the Greek initials of Christos, acting as a label but also blazoning forth from his head like the rays of the sun; putting a subtle twist on the third-century imagery of Helios and Sol Invictus – a deity with whom Christ is often associated, as in the Mausoleum of the Julii in Rome, not least because of the prophet Malachi’s messianic prediction that the “Sun of Righteousness” would arise “with healing in his wings” (Mal. 4: 2). Indeed an ancient Armenian prayer for Epiphany runs:

“Come and see how the radiant Helios
Is baptized in the waters of a wretched river.
A mighty Cross appeared over the baptismal font.
The servants of sin descend,  
And the children of immortality rise up.  
Come then and receive the light!”  

*(Rituale Armenorum, 1905: 427)*

The Chi-Rho symbol is worthy of a sermon itself; its adoption by the Emperor Constantine, according to one account by the church historian, Eusebius, after a vision of a sign in the sun before his famous Battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312. But it’s not what I want to focus on today.

The question I want us to ask ourselves is – what does it mean to depict Jesus like this? What is the impact of putting him in such a setting, alongside seemingly secular elements such as the hunt scenes and the Hellenistic myth of Bellerophon? Intriguingly it’s not a one-off combination. Just a few miles away, in a probably fourth-century mosaic from Frampton (sadly now known to us only from 18th-century drawings), the same school of mosaicists included a Chi-Rho symbol (albeit without a figure) alongside another Bellerophon.

Some are bothered by the juxtaposition of the Christian and the pagan, fearing some sort of heretical syncretism. Indeed the Frampton mosaics have been accused somewhat sloppily of ‘Gnosticism’. But for me this connects to a dangerous fundamentalist quest for purity of religion that has done, and continues to do, great harm throughout the centuries. And I want to encourage to ask rather, how else were these fourth-century Romano-British villa owners to depict their sense of divine epiphany?

If we accept with Paul’s Letter to the Romans or Luke’s account of Paul before the Areopagus or the opening verse of the Letter to the Hebrews, that God is a God who always speaks, who always reveals himself, then it should come as no surprise that intimations of his presence and purpose are to be found everywhere. True Christianity does not claim to be the only epiphany but rather the epiphany that makes sense of all the other ones. As Hebrews puts, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” *(Heb. 1: 1)*. Last week the Archdeacon touched on the sense of a universal experience of the divine – something fundamental about the open hand which speaks of God in not just Christianity but Buddhism and many other world religions too. This is something slightly different.
Here, I would suggest, we have a Christian attempting to express his Christian revelation through the signs and symbols of the world in which he grew up. Someone grappling to express the inexpressible through borrowed iconography – both the trappings of empire and the language of myth.

We are not dealing here with a simple allegory or code to be deciphered but rather an engagement between different cultures, a putting of new wine into old wine-skins. As the old Jewish proverb warned, this will burst them open but here in creative and novel ways.

First we have the image of Christ himself. It is his youthful clean-shaven appearance that typically strikes viewers today, as we are much more familiar with the later bearded versions and their greater debt to images of Zeus than Apollo. But for ancient viewers it would probably have been his clothing and portrayal in bust fashion. For these were the trappings of Roman portraiture, of imperial power and presence – this is a very particular sense of Emmanuel, of ‘God with us’. Just as Grünewald would paint Christ as a victim of St Antony’s fire for a hospital community or Blake would imagine a Georgian Christ walking upon England’s green and pleasant land, the Dorset mosaicists have made Christ a wealthy Roman citizen for this wealthy Roman villa owner. And what’s more, made him look out at us with doleful eyes that demand relationship. Scholars often seek to resolve too quickly the complex interplay of power in such images, whether it endows the emperor with Christ’s authority or shrinks our Saviour to the stature of a Constantius or Magnentius.

The Christ figure has none of the usual attributes of Hellenistic divinity but is shown between two pomegranates. As are two of the corner figures (variously identified as winds or seasons or the evangelists – itself a potentially unresolvable question, as Christians like Irenaeus could symbolically equate the evangelists with the four winds as speaking to every corner of the earth). These are almost certainly more than decorative and probably invoke a sense of the harrowing of hell and the hope of immortality, not through the Exodus command to weave them into the high priest’s ephod, nor even the Jewish symbolism of eating pomegranate seeds at Rosh Hashanah. But rather the story of Persephone, trapped in the Underworld for six months of each year after eating Hades’ pomegranate.

The visual vocabulary is Greco-Roman but the truth is Christian. So too perhaps the entirely pagan image of Bellerophon. But for the context and the fact that the pavement
is clearly a single design, this image would sit entirely apart and would never be heard in a Christian register. And yet this iconography has found a more lasting place in Western Christian art. For Greek Bellerophon would be woven together with the Michael of Jewish Apocalypse and the George of English legend – all speaking of the epiphanic hope that light is triumphing over darkness, good over evil. Thus even here in the Cathedral in our North Transept window (sadly blocked today by the scaffolding for our new lighting system), it is the iconography of Bellerophon and the Chimera which is used to interpret the passage we read from Revelation, rather than John the Divine’s words alone.

So what does all this mean for us? I doubt any of us are rushing to take this image into our prayer life or to seek the email of a good mosaicist to install a copy in our living room. But what it can do is remind us that for a divine epiphany to touch our lives it needs to come close, it needs to speak into the culture that we inhabit, the signs and symbols in which we live and move. God’s truth is not something separate from our material world of space and time, of language and culture, rather it enters into it - that is the message of Christmas, of incarnation; the lesson of Epiphany is perhaps that we need to be more willing to both speak and hear that truth in the trappings of daily life; to recognise that this truth will be heard and spoken differently by those in different cultures whether in our own city and country or around the world.