

Epiphany 2019

Frank Field has been the Labour MP for Birkenhead for nearly forty years. I should really say simply MP for Birkenhead, since last summer he resigned the Labour whip and now sits as an Independent. He is famously a very independent kind of politician. Oddly for a socialist and a child poverty campaigner he was very close friends with Margaret Thatcher. By contrast, he *didn't* get on with his colleagues in the 1997 Labour Government, and Tony Blair finally fired him for not being enough of a team-player. Now, he is one of the few senior Labour people to strongly support Brexit. Frank can usually be relied upon to have his own strong, awkward, not quite part of the club line.

As in politics, so in religion. Frank is a faithful Christian, turning up Evensong nearly every week. But he is not entirely on message. Why do you go to church, the Spectator magazine asked him before Christmas. For the beautiful music, he said, for the choir. Do you believe in life after death? I hope so, says Frank, I've no certainty. I struggle all the time to think, 'is this believable?' I'm not like evangelicals who say their life has been touched, they know Jesus personally. I haven't got any of that feeling at all.'

I haven't got any of that feeling at all. Of knowing Jesus personally, of my life being touched.

For some people, saying that means Frank isn't a Christian. He might be a church-goer, but he isn't a Christian. Being Christian means being touched by Jesus, having that personal relationship with him.

Well, while I wouldn't put it quite like Frank did, I do know where he is coming from. Sometimes when people use that kind of language they seem to mean a relationship very like the one you might have with the person sitting next to you, where you chat easily, where Jesus is like your best friend. It's not like that for me - and not, I know, for a great many of us. The relationship is more difficult, strange than that - not quite distant, that wouldn't be the right word, but not easy either. Knowing Jesus for us is hard and slow. It takes patience and is full of mystery. Full too, sometimes, of frustration.

Well, by now, I imagine some of you might be thinking: well this is all very interesting, but I would rather hear something about Epiphany please, and about the bible texts we've just read. That's what sermons are for, not meanderings about what random MPs think and the vicar's spiritual life.

But the reason these Scriptures, and the Feast of Epiphany, and Frank Field go together is this.

The basic claim of Paul in Ephesians 3 and Matthew in chapter 2 is the same claim. In their different ways, they are making the one same point. And that is, that Jesus of Nazareth is the one around whom *all* human lives revolve. Jesus is a Jew, no doubt about that, He is the King of the Jews the wise men seek. But they come as representatives of the Gentiles, from far flung lands, exotic mystery. They come and kneel and pay him homage, to say their lives

now are bound to his life, claimed by his life, shaped by his life. Matthew says it in a story, St. Paul puts it in an argument: 'the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus.' This is my, Paul's, commission: to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ. To help them find those boundless riches, through bringing them to Jesus. And all this is just what Isaiah 61 said would happen: arise, shine, God says to downtrodden Jerusalem: nations will come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn. Strangers, Gentiles will come running to you, because in you they will find the secret of glory and joy.

All three the readings are saying that the human story is really one story, with one centre. Whoever you are, wherever in history and geography you find yourself, the secret of your glory and joy dawned in one time and one place, in one baby. You might be a king from the distant east following a star, you might be a soldier stationed on a god-forsaken rain drenched and dismal Roman island in the far north of the Roman Empire, you might be a choral music loving Labour MP, you might be a Muslim in the fourteenth century, a Sikh in the nineteenth, or a Hindu in the 21st. No matter. Whoever and wherever you are, *this* life, this one solitary life, this baby, is the centre of your story. This baby, whether you know it or not, is the secret of your glory and your joy.

Now that is a spectacular, some would say spectacularly *arrogant* claim. Note, though, what it *doesn't* say. It doesn't say that people who aren't Christians are bad people. It doesn't say anyone is going to Hell, it doesn't say that Christians have all the answers. No. It says that *Jesus* is the centre, that his riches are boundless, that from Him and in Him, whether they know it now or not, everyone but everyone will find their destiny, their final joy. To some, of course, that will still sound arrogant: because it is saying that Jesus is somehow greater than Buddha, greater than Guru Nanak, greater than Mohammad. But if that is arrogance then I fear a certain degree of it is simply inescapable. Believing that Jesus is somehow the centre of things in a way which the others, however great they are, are not is pretty much the essence of Christianity.

Now back to Frank Field and the language of personal relationship with Jesus. Maybe, like Frank, you're not quite sure what to make of people who tell you that they chat to Jesus all the time, that Jesus is their best friend, that they can just 'hang out' with Jesus, that they talk to Him and He talks to them. You might suspect either that they're mad, or that you're not really a Christian – or possibly both.

Well, here's another way of thinking of it. Accept that's how it is for them. We are all different, and different is not necessarily wrong. If that's how Jesus is for them, great: it doesn't mean that's how He must be for you too. But just because it feels different, certainly not like a chat with your best friend and perhaps not like very much at all, doesn't mean that you too don't have a personal relationship with Jesus. The point of Epiphany is that you do. Before you have begun to think or feel or believe anything about Him, he is

already the centre of your life. The relationship with Jesus is not a special thing better Christians than you have, it is the core of *everyone's* life. *Everyone*. That core might get experienced in different ways, according to the different kinds of personalities we have, but the core is there in *all of us*. There is not a single person on the planet who does not have a personal relationship with Jesus - never has been and never will be. The human race is one body, one story, and its one centre is Christ.

Now what we're called to do, of course, is to grow into that relationship. To make it more and more conscious, more and more the defining thing about our lives, to go deeper into the boundless riches. To do as the wise men did: to kneel, and do homage – to learn humility, and allow ourselves to be reshaped around Him. To bring the core ever closer to the surface. That's why we come to church, that's what all this is about. Epiphany says, it's what being *human* is all about. This year, let us make that our top priority.

Peter Waddell