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Moving to centre stage **by Rosemary Hanna**

When Jesus was born there was peace. Any recorded disturbance was no more than a half-forgotten slur on his mother, which surprisingly did not result in an ‘honour killing’ but, against the odds, a marriage.

Even today, nobody is much threatened by Christmas. Not so much because it is unthreatening, but because its message can be missed so easily, as it is on so many cute Christmas cards, and in so many charming nativity plays.

Epiphany marks the move of that child from the shadows onto the centre stage. His glory begins to be manifest. On Sunday or Monday (depending on the congregation) we will all celebrate that glory. In some countries, for instance Mexico, Epiphany is still the main day of rejoicing and present giving. It makes sense. We are celebrating the moment when people first start to take notice of the child, the moment when somebody who matters in the eyes of the world senses his glory and begins to feel after who he is. It is no coincidence that at that very moment, when we first celebrate the glory of Christ openly, the trouble starts. Because at all times and in all places Christ is a threat to the established order.

Epiphany

shock oracles rarity wonder prophecy unforeseen sign inspiration attack announcement godsend display astonishment publication whammy thunderbolt eureka awe marvel proclamation unexpected foreshadowing wonderment vision revelation discovery phenomenon news manifestation miracle unearthing start unveiling flash curiosity divination jolt divulgement fortune exhibition exposure

The values of Epiphany are the values of the Magnificat, and, come to that, the values most consistently stressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament: justice for the poor, joy for the sorrowing, and repentance for the rich.

Some aspects of this challenge to the

established order are easier for our world to swallow than others. It is politically expedient at the moment in our country to blame the ills of society on the poor, the sick, and the stranger. These are the very categories of person in whom, according to St Matthew, we meet Christ in all his glory. Those with the courage to point out that the blame does not lie where it is apportioned are (now as then) vilified. Christians singing hymns, or practising personal pieties, are welcome to their private devotions. Christians speaking openly about the growing numbers unable to feed themselves in one of the richest countries in the world? Not so much. It is inconvenient to direct attention to the truth that, so far from being work-shy loungers, many of the poor are in jobs, often the jobs others would not wish to undertake.

Many leap with delight on the idea of sending the rich empty away, and small blame to them. Only, this has never been a popular message to those in power — and in our age that includes the media. They may admire Pope Francis hugging those with disabilities, but they only admire the rest of his message if they can imagine it directed to countries far away.

The Epiphany gospel is drawn from Matthew, and a part of it is the idea of strangers coming to worship the Christ. Matthew will take up that idea later, where the suggestion is that when we invite in the stranger, we invite Christ himself, and all that is good with him. Today it seems strangers are only welcome when they are neither Romanian nor Bulgarian — oh, and as long as they are not also sick, because then we will only help if they can pay.

The work of Epiphany is to bring the private moments of Christmas into the public area. It is our work. The song which Mary sings to Elizabeth must now be sung out loud for all the world to hear, even when it tries to stop its ears. If the glory of Christ is to be seen and his values are to shine out, each of us must sing that song, and loudly, too.

Rosemary Hannah is the author of The Grand Designer.