

**For the Feast of Epiphany
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
6th January 2022**

**Dr. Deborah Lewer on Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
The Adoration of the Kings in the Snow (Epiphany) 1563
wood panel, 35 x 55 cm
Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz', Winterthur,
Switzerland**

1.

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the Feast of Epiphany today. It's a time of revelation. Of new life. And a time to reflect on the Word made flesh and dwelling - *among us*.

So, this Epiphany, let's look at a small, modest painting: at first glance, an ordinary winter scene. It's by an extraordinary sixteenth-century artist who saw and revealed everyday life like no other – Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This little painting is called *The Adoration of the Kings in the Snow*. It's sometimes also simply known by the word meaning revelation: *Epiphany*.

2.

What do we see? Bruegel shows us a provincial Netherlandish town, blanketed in white. Fat snowflakes are falling on rustic homes and on dilapidated ruins. The people of this place are busy with their lives. They're occupied – with their daily tasks, with the challenges and concerns of a cold, harsh season. Someone draws icy water from a half-frozen pond. A foolish child scuds across its surface in a toy boat. Fires have been lit and fuel is being gathered. Men carry heavy burdens, dogs by their side. Some people loiter, aimlessly.

Hardly anyone notices the small family. They are there in a murky corner at the very far, edge of Bruegel's painting. What does the artist mean putting them at this margin? There is almost no room for them. A man, a young woman, and a tiny, swaddled bundle – a baby. Their shelter is poor, lowly, barely adequate. And they are indistinct. But a few figures, different from the rest, have drawn near. They are strangers from far away, with mules laden with baggage. The travelers have come to present gifts, to kneel and to see.

3.

Bruegel pays attention to something very ordinary here - the weather. The sky is muted. There's no bright sun, there's no shining star. But the snow falling, settling, swaddles the world making it light. It turns things around. It's the snow that makes the busy bodies stand out against the off-white ground with its hues of flesh and earth. The light dusting of snow on people's heads tells us that no-one here looks up into snowy skies, for signs or anything else. But this *is* a painting about vision. About where we look. About what is seen and unseen. And the painter makes paint do what snow does: obscure as well as reveal. With hundreds of dots of white, the artist veils his *own* hard-worked vision of the world. It's a radical and transformative effacement.

4.

This Epiphany, what might Bruegel's little image of a corner of the restless world, say to us? We might think about its margins, and where there is no room. About how what is so decisive can be so readily overlooked. Perhaps his sixteenth-century winter might remind us of the unceasing busyness of our own time. As we begin a new year, will we look to the heavens for signs, hoping for revelation? Will we be smothered and distracted by endless tasks, never pausing, never broadening our view? Or might we simply draw closer to what is with us, right here, if we only seek, stop, kneel, love and see.