

Epiphanies and the 'self-sufficing power of solitude'

Assembly by Sophie, Upper Sixth Form Pupil, March 2024

Have you ever had one of those marvellously satisfying experiences when understanding suddenly washes over you, and you have a moment of clarity and inspiration? Perhaps you particularly resonated with a certain book, or finally understood how to work out a fiendish maths question. Epiphanies like these cannot be purposefully discovered, but rather come to light in the moment, instantaneously and decisively; indeed, the word comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning 'appearance' or 'manifestation'. These flashes of insight take shape in different ways for different people, and so today I'd like to talk about my moment of epiphany, and what provoked it.

My revelatory experience came one evening in October, right here in this cathedral, during the quiet moments before Choral Evensong. Sitting in this vast medieval chamber, surrounded by pointed stone, stained glass and dark oak, I welcomed the chance to contemplate and spend time with myself. As my thoughts stilled, it became clear to me how much I love and take pleasure in the quiet life of reflection. In a world which so often seeks to celebrate and acknowledge loudness and extroversion, I felt frustrated that quieter, unassuming types are overlooked as a result. But, in that exact moment, right there and then, I had my moment of epiphany. I understood that, instead of being ashamed of my quiet, contemplative temperament and viewing it as a hindrance, I should embrace it and focus on the skills that being quiet gives me - namely, *writing* about my experience, and speaking about it today.

It was half-way through an English lesson when I had my second revelation of the week - realising that my experience of epiphany in the Cathedral was remarkably similar to that of the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor-Coleridge. In his 1797 poem *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, after having a skillet of boiling milk spilt on his foot, Coleridge is unable to walk in the countryside with his friends. He is forced to stay behind and rest his foot under a tree in his garden. But then, in a way strikingly identical to my experience, he has a revelation, a sudden realisation that instead of seeing his circumstances as an inconvenience, he should focus on what he *does* have - his faculties of imagination. By simply imagining nature in all its beauty, Coleridge is able to escape the constraints of his situation and find a sense of spiritual well-being within his solitude.

It is indisputable, then, that solitary, reflective experiences can provide the most fulfilment. The idea of solitude is different to loneliness, being something that you seek - and it's true that sometimes taking the time to seek out quiet spots to reflect can allow the best ideas to

come to fruition. For me, the dark, candlelit timelessness of Evensong is the perfect place to just let go and lose myself in my thoughts. In Coleridge's case, his residence in the Somerset Quantocks was hugely important to him. He could think clearly in the quiet about how much joy he found in nature. But, for all of you, seeking solitude could come in many other forms. From whiling away the hours playing music or doing art, to solitary sports like swimming and running, retreating to a place of restoration does wonders for releasing the creative imagination.

I'd like to leave you with some words from Coleridge himself. In one of his other poems, *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement*, he describes his cottage as 'the Valley of Seclusion', and recounts his reflective experience 'long-listening to the viewless sky-lark's note'. The act of listening is a more profound and intense way of experiencing the world. So, with all that said, I do urge you at some point to find your own valley of seclusion, to slow down and find a moment to listen and reflect, so that your moment of inspiration can strike.