

Epiphany Sunday, 3 January 2010

God in Flesh Made Manifest

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Isaiah 60:1-6, [Ephesians 3:1-12], Matthew 2:1-12

I didn't celebrate the New Year last week. And I didn't make any resolutions. I went to bed before midnight, and spent most of New Year's Day working. No, I wasn't in a bad mood or ill, I didn't pout. In fact, I had a great time with a friend on New Year's Eve. Over the last few years I decided I'm not a huge fan of the New Year, and mostly stopped celebrating it at all. Yeah, I'll go to a party. But then I'm always up for partying! I've also stopped making resolutions for the new year. Now, don't get me wrong, I still make resolutions, but I make them when I notice the need to make them, not because we declare one day a year a day to make a fresh start. For a lot of people, it seems, it's the one day to have a fresh start. The slate is wiped clean, a new calendar on the wall represents a new beginning. Something great can come. Resolutions are made to help keep people on this new track.

I don't see the big fuss we make to change a wall calendar, cap a tax season, and get ready for a month of scratched out '09s on documents. Why the big fanfare, I wonder. I posted my feelings online, and a friend of mine who's a Presbyterian minister in New York City responded: "amen. let's celebrate the beginning of a new year every second!". It dawned on me that that's it. For Christians, we don't look to one day a year to get a fresh start, like some civic Day of Atonement. We get a fresh start every day of the year, every hour of the day, every minute of the hour...and that fresh start is available to all people. That's the core of what we celebrate at Epiphany. Now, I'm not trying to knock people's celebrations. New Year and its celebration isn't bad, but when we can celebrate that every day, it just sort of feels unimportant.

Epiphany is the day, to use official churchy words, we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. More simply put, we celebrate the idea and belief that God's love came into human flesh and is available to all people. The ramifications of that are HUGE: No one is better than another, for we all rely on God's grace. It's no longer, so much, about a chosen people, but everyone is on a level playing field. Everyone is included—all are fully welcomed into the covenant God had established with Israel. Jew or Greek, male or female, black or white, gay or straight. That all are equally welcomed and loved by God, especially those who are poor, ostracised, and oppressed. We celebrate that God's love is available anew each day, and is always available for all, no matter where one is on life's journey. That's what Christmas means, and that's what we are invited to ponder at Epiphany.

But we so often miss those points during the Christmas season. When our entire Christmas celebration is spent sentimentally contemplating the sweet babe in a cattle stall with ox and ass adoring we miss the point. We might as well not even celebrate Christmas. The point is to celebrate the amazing thing God has done by coming into the world in the form of a human being. Epiphany gives us a chance to leave behind those cute nativity images and really explore the doctrine of the incarnation. Why is this birth important? We don't have a chance to ask that question when we end our Christmas celebration on the 24th or the 25th. The church gives us twelve days to really stop and think about what the heck it's all about.

So what is Epiphany? The use of the word in English is a bit misleading for this context. The word is a transliteration of a Greek word which means “appearance or manifestation”. It’s a theophany, God is shown to us and to all. Epiphany falls on January 6th, the last of the 12 days of Christmas. The celebration of Christmas culminates with the affirmation that God has indeed come to show love for all people, not just those descended from Abraham. And so, the early Church identified three stories that most demonstrate the manifestation: the journey and adoration of the magi, Christ’s baptism, and Jesus’s first miracle where he changed water into wine at the Wedding in Cana. Over the next two weeks we will be focusing on Christ’s baptism and the Wedding at Cana, so it’s good to keep in mind that those are all considered epiphany stories. Stories that show who Christ is to those who were around him. In the west, we really end up focusing just on the story of the Magi, but in the East, they focus primarily on Christ’s baptism. But since we’re a western church, the reading for today is about the Magi.

Who were the magi?

So much energy has also been put into figuring out who those mysterious visitors from the East. People have written volumes on what was going on in the night sky when and what it might have meant to some people in some societies in some places that might have looked to stars for astrological significance. Bla bla bla. If you want to know my opinion, I don’t really care who they are or if they even existed. And in fact, they probably didn’t. Yes, it’s possible that some ancient sages who read the stars found a unique event in the constellation that represented the Jewish people, but I really don’t think that’s important. The question we should be asking is what does the visit mean, and why is it included in the gospel. The most likely scenario of why the story is that this band of travellers is a literary device to connect Jesus with the Prophets of old.

Matthew was likely trying to connect Jesus to passages like: Psalm 72, “May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.” And Isaiah 60 that declares “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And, “all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.” Matthew would have known about these passages, and what better way to connect Jesus to the story of his people than to have foreign visitors come bearing gifts. After all, immediately following that, Matthew connect Jesus to the story of Moses, who was under threat of death from a King, and sends him to Egypt so that he can come out from Egypt like Moses.

Whether historical or not, the story of the magi is important because of what it teaches. In this story, outsiders are among the first to be welcomed in, and are given the chance to offer tribute to the Christ child. This is because God’s way of dealing with the world has shifted. God’s favor now reaches beyond Israel which was the least of the nations. God’s favor is now for the least of these of every nation. And everyone is invited to join in God’s plan for the cosmos. Jesus experienced a humble birth, and live in an oppressed situation, he knew exclusion and stood on the side of those excluded. He stood on the side of welcoming every one.

In order to emphasise the universal nature of Christ’s saving birth, early commentators imaginatively attributed characteristics to three of the magi. One was old with white hair, one young with short hair and a ruddy complexion, and another with black skin and a heavy beard.

Everyone has been invited to God’s natal party, even those who have been travelling different paths. The word magi comes from the word for sorcerer, which was condemned elsewhere in scripture. But God was able to work through another religious

traditions to welcome people in. The magi are model believers, not because of who they are, but because of the intentions behind their actions, and the faith that leads them to the child. Similarly, everyone is now invited, not because of who they are, but because of their intentions, because of their willingness to come. It is this welcoming of all that central to Epiphany. The visit of the magi signals a change. It represents a whole new way of looking at the world. A new age has dawned.

A story is told about Maria and Pablo, who were poor. Very poor. They were orphans living on the outskirts of a small pueblo. They wore rags, and ate only when a villager stopped by with leftovers. Advent was hastily coming to an end, and Christmas was on its way. Soon all the villagers would gather at the small church in the plaza. The villagers would gather to offer their gifts to the El Niño in the manger. Many villagers offered nice gifts, or handmade crafts, or mementoes that were important. But Maria and Pablo had none of those.

The morning of the 24th arrived. Maria and Pablo wondered if they should even go to the church without a gift. What would the other worshippers think if they came empty handed. Would they think they didn't love Jesus? Would they think they didn't have good intentions? They looked around their tiny shack for something they could offer. But there was nothing. They decided to head to the church early, hoping to get to El Niño before the others. Maybe nobody would see they were without a gift.

Along the way to the church Maria and Pablo--near tears--saw some weeds along the road. They figured a small bouquet of weeds was better than no gift at all. Maria stooped down, gathered some weeds, and formed them into a small bouquet. They continued to the church only to find that some of the other children had already gathered. But Maria and Pablo bravely approached El Niño Jesus, and lovingly offered the weeds at the manger as the other children laughed at them. But they didn't laugh for long because those weeds transformed into a beautiful flower now known as the Poinsettia.

The God of the incarnation was able look into the hearts of Maria and Pablo, and welcomed their gift, and welcomed them. Just like the old widow who gave her last mite, or the woman who touched Jesus's hem, the God of the Incarnation can still look into our hearts, into all peoples' hearts.

That's right, the incarnation and manifestation upsets the old order. Now the first are last and the last are first. Yes, God cares about the least of these. And with God's incarnation, they are invited in. Invited to become a part of God's family. No matter who they are, or where they've been, or what they've done.

As we come to the last few days of Christmas, and as we celebrate the Epiphany on Wednesday, I invite you to think about what the incarnation means to you. And as you come to the table, remember to give thanks that God has included you, just the way you are, into God's family.