

SPG#119, The Epiphany

January 7, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matt. 2:1-12

Of all the major feasts Epiphany probably is the one that requires the most explanation. Webster defines “epiphany” as a manifestation of the reality of a divine being. Saul, after persecuting followers of Jesus, was confronted by the presence of Christ in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. That could be called an epiphany for Saul as it changed his whole life, not to mention his name from Saul to Paul. The Transfiguration where Jesus again appeared in dazzling light to his disciples could be called an epiphany. Epiphanies in the life of Jesus were seen apart from his day to day teachings, and probably even apart from healings and miracles. These epiphanies or manifestations of Christ usually had the effect of commanding everyone’s attention to the point of being overwhelming.

The first epiphany traditionally has been the finding of the Christ child by the three wise men or the three kings. For quite some time they had discerned indications of his arrival by studying the stars. After all this anticipation and study, they finally found the child in Bethlehem. It was an epiphany, the first epiphany.

Rev. George Bass, a Lutheran pastor, says that the aim of Epiphany is to manifest the full glory of Christ to the world. It does this by appearing as a supplemental celebration to Christmas.

It is therefore linked to the birth of Jesus and to the response and worship of people.

Originally the celebration of Epiphany included three elements: the Baptism of Jesus, the first miracle at Cana of Galilee, where the water was turned to wine, and the visit of the three Kings.

A celebration of the birth of Christ plus these three events ideally performed the Epiphany function of manifesting the full glory of Christ to the world. Christmas celebrates the humanity of Jesus. In his birth we see he really was born of a woman. In Epiphany, through the celebration of his Baptism, we see his relationship with the Father. Both Christmas and Epiphany taken together attest to the fact that Jesus was divine and human at birth. Bass says that Epiphany celebrations began in the second century. In fact, the celebration is older than the celebration of December 25.

So, we can see that the early church was focused, not just on a Christmas celebration, but on a Christmas-Epiphany celebration where Jesus' birth, coupled with the account of his Baptism, the miracle at Cana, and the visit of the 3 Kings put forth Jesus as human and divine simultaneously. Perhaps we can further appreciate this when we realize that the human-divine nature of Jesus was not just a lofty theological idea. But it was a reality that was meant to be celebrated just like Christmas and Easter. Bass makes the point that some of the important meaning of Epiphany has been lost through neglect and confusion.

He suggests that we focus on five emphases that will help us recapture Epiphany.

The first emphasis is on Jesus' relationship with the Father. There are indications that no one had referred to God as Father before Jesus did. His doing that quite possibly could have been seen as radical.

The second emphasis, through the story of changing water into wine at Cana, is the emphasis on Christ who gives new wine to the church. Through Word and Eucharist he sustains the church with new wine.

The third emphasis is on Christ who is Lord over sin and suffering. Christ the Healer.

The fourth emphasis is on Christ as Lord over life and death.

And finally Christ is Lord over time and eternity. Again, Bass makes the point that part of the meaning of Epiphany has been lost in history. And that the truth of Epiphany was not meant to be obtained in advanced training only. It was meant to be known and celebrated by the people in the church year.

In my own study of the epiphanies around Jesus Christ, I find a powerful element of magic that is part and parcel of all the epiphanies. Do you recall when Jesus came to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, walking on the water. When they were frightened, he said, "Don't be afraid. It's me." And in that one occurrence Peter, James, and John knew that it was Jesus. They knew that he was their friend, their teacher. But there was also his walking on the water, something magical. When he was transfigured in the blinding light before his followers, they knew it was him. But they also knew that he appeared in a blinding light. Something magical. And so this Jesus was someone to walk with, someone to listen to, someone to eat with. But he could also change water into wine.

And once he fed five thousand people using a few loaves of bread and some fish. And when he called for a dead man, Lazarus, to come out of the tomb, he did. Did you ever ask yourself the question, "How would I have related to Jesus in the first century as a friend?"

Would you have been someone who always expressed your amazement at what he did?

Like, at the campfire at night over supper, you would have said something like,

"You know, when you fed those five thousand people, I couldn't believe it." Or, perhaps you would have been more matter of fact, and said something like, "You know when you walked on the water, I was wondering maybe if we could discuss that."

Or, perhaps you would have been one who was too stunned to speak. And you would have felt it inappropriate or ill mannered to even bring it up. And perhaps you would have been one who appreciated just associating with Jesus in his epiphanies.

Those kinds of questions get at what it was like to have Jesus as a friend, and also to be in his life as a witness, someone who knew him, but also someone who saw what he did, and heard what he said. And we could say that those questions are relegated to the first century, because that is when Jesus Christ appeared in physical form.

But, if Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist. If we sense his presence in the Word of God, then those questions are our questions too. And they are epiphany questions.

Because they are about friendship and relationship, and they are about magic.

And the question after those questions is, "What is it like to have such a friend? What is it like to know the Son of God? What is it like to know him in his love? What is it like to know him in his magic? One thing that comes out of the New Testament is that there is nothing to fear about the epiphanies of Jesus. In almost every instance he says, "Do not be afraid." Rather these experiences seem to be for our appreciation and our benefit.

The question that is begged then is, Do we allow for epiphanies in our own lives?

Do we allow for an appreciation of them? Do we allow for that benefit?

I have been talking with some of the parents of our younger children. And we have been discussing the possibility of having an adult education session on talking to your child about faith. In that session I would expect we would talk about the man Jesus. And we would talk about being a friend with Jesus. But we would also talk about knowing Jesus in his magic. The goal would be to assist our young people in their own consideration of Jesus and his epiphanies.

The famous Episcopal priest and Bishop, Phillips Brooks, once said that the presence of Christ could be likened to fire.

And the presence of the followers of Christ could be likened to candles. Without the fire the candle has no purpose. With the fire the candle becomes like the fire and gives light to all.

This Epiphany, be the candle. Be inflamed by the Son of God in a way you have not been before. Be inflamed by his love. Be inflamed by his magic.

God has called you out of darkness, into his wonderful light.

May you experience his kindness and blessings,

And be strong in faith, in hope, in love.

And because you are followers of Christ,

Who appeared on this day as a light shining in darkness,

May He make you a light to all your sisters and brothers. Amen.

