

Epiphany
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Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 60:1 - 6

Psalm 72

Ephesians 3:1 - 12

Matthew 2:1 - 12

The mystery of God's unifying grace

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, commented on fumbling for the light switch in the early morning and the difficulty of adjusting to effect of the sudden change in light. Once you have stopped bumping into things and made it to the bathroom the situation of being able to see properly is so obvious it is hard to remember the previous state.

The feast of the Epiphany is a meditation on the light that shines in Christ to enlighten the whole world. We are so used to the idea that the grace of God touches all people in all creation that in retrospect it is hard to believe anyone ever thought this could not be so. But what is now obvious was at one time hardly imaginable. Luke's inclusion of the Shepherds in the birth narratives places the outsiders near the action, but they were Jews, even if something of social outcasts. Matthew's story includes people from higher up the social scale, Herod the King, and the Magi, pagan foreigners from outside the fold. What is being said here is that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is a great act of salvation that crosses boundaries and affects the entire world. Matthew reflects Isaiah's vision of salvation, a revelation of the Light of God that will shine over previously forsaken and despised Jerusalem and draw people bearing gifts from afar to worship. A transformation takes place in which darkness is overcome by light, sadness and death give way to joy. The light that shines from the heart of God will surpass the sun and moon to become the true light for the world.

Ephesians, which is so close to the ethos of Paul's writing it is taken to be his own, celebrates the unveiling of a mystery. The sense is direct and dramatic, as if a light has been turned on. The mystery is not Christ. The mystery, now made fully known through him, is God's plan "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" [1:10]. The early chapters of Ephesians include fulsome prayers of blessing that celebrate God's victory over the dark powers and claim his sovereignty over the world. At every step the victory is accomplished "in Christ" the Messiah [Wright, *Paul*, p 101] who is the complete expression of the will and wisdom of the God of Israel. What is accomplished is the unification of Jews and Gentiles. This is not a case of adopting new associated members or taking on stepchildren or offering people temporary protection visas. It means that before God all people are embraced with the utmost affection and accepted as equal inheritors of the rich promises of God. This is the reason for the deep praise of the prayers in Ephesians. What it celebrates is equivalent to God accomplishing a great new act of redemption affecting the entire world, the plan of which stretches back to creation and onwards to the fulfillment of all things.

Chapter 3 of Ephesians is a meditation on the new status of the Gentiles. As people who once would not have qualified to benefit from God's covenant, we can be glad that what is redefined here is who is included in the community of God's grace. But the real redefinition is deeper than that. The mystery that Ephesians celebrates is the revelation of what really lies in the heart of God. At Epiphany we are not so much concerned with ourselves, people once excluded who are now included. Rather, we are concerned with who God is for the world. God is one who wills that all things, whether in heaven or on earth, should be gathered up into him. And God has sought to make this possible through Christ. Epiphany celebrates how God seeks to lead the world to a new path of life and a new sense of itself as a community reconciled by grace.

The news we are dealing with here was the basis for Paul's call to be an Apostle for Jesus Christ. It was because of something said to him, rather than because of conclusions he came to himself that Paul was engaged as a messenger. He was not a volunteer. Paul was called and sent out to share the news we are talking about and he raised up communities to live out and pass on the message of reconciliation he received. The word for Apostle, in Greek Literature stood for the herald who was sent to arrange a truce. Although the word is used rarely in biblical literature, it is a powerful concept. The one sent carries the full authority of the sending one. When the Apostle speaks, the one who sends speaks.

If we think of God as the sender, and the world as at odds with God, there is a wonderful thought in the idea that in sending Jesus Christ, God was intending to bring about a truce with the entire world. Paul's work began when the one sent engaged him to take this news across borders to people who had no inkling it affected them.

What makes the Gospel good news is that fact that everything Jesus Christ represents reflects God's loving decision to reconcile creation, which includes the offer of grace to all people. Just as God called Abraham, and sought to create a people through whom the whole world would be blessed, so Jesus is God's man for the world. His task was to uncover for all to see, God's intention for human life, which is that it all people, not just some, should live in the light of the wisdom of God. The Church that follows Jesus Christ is called to live from its knowledge of God's unification of all those whom race religion and politics had worked to keep separate. This is the wonder of God's inclusive love. The Church exists, not to play chaplain to the established order of social life. Rather, it is called to embody the wisdom of God who breaks down barriers disturbs the status quo and challenges vested interests, so that all may be one.

This Christmas in contrast to recent years, the city of Bethlehem was open to receive tourists and pilgrims. Much was made of how well the traders would do, compared to the past. One man who sells olive woodcarvings of the manger scene, showed his latest version: it included the wall that has been built to divide Bethlehem. The Magi were there, on the wrong side of the wall, unable to enter and offer their gifts. Epiphany celebrates that Bethlehem is a city for all the world. The church has every right to offer fervent worship in Bethlehem. And it is also called to live out what it knows, that barriers such as exist there and elsewhere are inconsistent with the truth that informs its life. The church is called to live, allowing the real meaning of Epiphany shape its life so that others may come and live in the wonder of God's gift of reconciling love. So may it be.