

January 3, 2021 - Epiphany of our Lord - Reflection

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Many of us can remember participating in a Christmas Pageant where people dressed in robes and crowns brought gifts to the manger scene where Mary and Joseph waited with the baby. In this very common tableau we are taught about the Royal nature of Jesus' birth and the far reaching impact of the Incarnation. The birth of Jesus marked a very important time in the history of the world because during the next 30 or so years God would move mightily on the earth through the person born in a manger and through that would announce the next stage in the restoration planned from the beginning of time. We know from the story told by Matthew that these visitors, called Magi, were not from the nation of Israel and so they mark the first of the Gentiles to come and worship God in Jesus Christ. This event, pictured and recreated in Christmas Pageants, was a tremendously significant event in the story of God and God's people. Like the birth itself the event went by without a great deal of notice by other people but that does not reduce its significance.

God's story of restoration involved a Covenant with a particular family, the family of Abraham. Through the generations that followed Abraham and Sarah came the nation of Israel. God had selected this family, partly due to the faith displayed by their Patriarch Abraham, to bring God's blessing to the world around them. They were to be the means through which God restored His relationship with all of humanity. The division between Jews and Gentiles was an unfortunate by-product of that process but through many passages of Scripture God had announced His intention to welcome all people into the household. Isaiah spoke about this often and the feast of the Epiphany celebrates the fact that we, who would be called Gentiles, have been adopted into the household of Abraham's descendants. The very first indication that this was actually going to happen was the visit by the Magi to Jesus. Isaiah predicted that 'nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning' (Isa 60:3) and the arrival of these travelers from the East indicated the beginning of that process. When the Covenant was first established with Abraham the descendants were to become 'a blessing to many nations' and through the Messiah that was coming true.

As the events unfold we also see how the dawning of the light affects those who are not interested in being in the light. The birth of Jesus did not immediately usher in peace and harmony - the yeast of the kingdom of heaven had to work its way into the dough. The Magi first visited the reigning king Herod. When Herod heard the news 'he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.' We have all witnessed examples of this - when the ruling council is upset the country gets upset and Jerusalem during the reign of Herod was no different. From other accounts we can conclude that Herod loved the

position he had been granted more than he loved the people he was meant to serve. When Herod was disturbed all of Jerusalem got worried. Rather than rejoicing about God's Messiah coming to birth Herod plotted on how to get rid of this potential rival to his throne. Darkness does not like the light but, as St. John writes, darkness cannot overcome the light. These first glimmers of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth were met with resistance from the existing power structures. The need for the Holy Couple to flee to Egypt in the face of Herod's wrath is a reality that is sometimes faced by proclaimers of God's truth. The dawning light does not attract all of earth's kings to come to God's throne but for those who answer the call adoption into God's family is the prize.

Matthew's version of the Nativity story brings us this news of the foreign worshipers coming to pay homage to the Christ Child and we can all rejoice in that movement. It tells the reader that no one is beyond the reach of God and that through the Messiah the dividing wall between Gentile and Jew will be eliminated. This idea was reinforced by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. He wrote, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 3:6) The outsiders are to become insiders through the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The reunification of the human race is begun by the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem of Judea just as the prophet Micah had predicted. This was part of God's plan all along and the nation of Israel was chosen to be the means through which this reality could be born into the world. Like St. Paul before us we are invited to become 'a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power' (3:7) The news of the end of division is part of the message we are asked to share as we speak about our experience with God.

The feast of the Epiphany falls on the 12th day of Christmas and marks the end of that season as the Good News concerning the Jewish Messiah is shared with the wider world and "kings come to the brightness of God's dawning". The separation of the people of the earth seems to be a natural development but it is not according to God ultimate purpose. Over and over again the message of God is seen to be designed to ultimately draw people into one great fellowship of believers. The Church arranged this method of remembering and celebrating this good news by positioning the Feast of the Epiphany where it is and immediately following it by the celebration of Jesus' Baptism as he begins his adult ministry among the people of Israel. The fulfillment of the promise is seen in glimpses of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven through Jesus' life and ministry and then experienced in a fuller manner at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell on the band of believers and they were sent to the corners of the known world.

We are invited to be part of that same story by opening our hearts to the truth and accepting the

fact that we have been adopted into the family of God in which the previous divisions between cultures has been erased. The Feast of the Epiphany is a marvelous opportunity to celebrate the grace of God in bringing us into the family that has been chosen to be the vehicle for God's restoration of the entire world. Let us praise God and bring him our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies to be "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - which is your spiritual act of worship." (Romans 12:1b) The entrance into this family of God brings with it the privilege of serving as a beacon for God as the work of restoration continues in our generation. New opportunities open themselves to us because we have been drawn in by God's grace to the fellowship of believers. Our lives have been forever linked to God's plan and we too are sent into the world to share the Good News of God in Christ Jesus. One of the wonderful things about this, in my experience, is that whatever gifts and talents we may have are accepted and used by God. As the years of service to God continue those initial talents are honed and strengthened and new talents may be added. Like adopted children we are fully accepted just as we are but, as the author Max Lucado has observed, "God loves us too much to leave us that way". Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah the restoration of all of Creation continues to affect our lives and the lives of those with whom we come into contact. My constant hope is that we will become even more effective at the ability to share this news and encourage others to accept their adoption as well.

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know thee by faith, may be led onward through this earthly life, until we see the vision of thy heavenly glory; through the same Jesus Christ, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. (BCP. p. 117)