

The Epiphany

Year C

RCL



Ephesians 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Matthew 2:1-12

The Collect

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

Deus, iudicium

- 1 Give the King your justice, O God, *
and your righteousness to the King's Son;
- 2 That he may rule your people righteously *
and the poor with justice;
- 3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the
people, *
and the little hills bring righteousness.
- 4 He shall defend the needy among the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.
- 5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure,
*
from one generation to another.
- 6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown
field, *
like showers that water the earth.
- 7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; *
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon
shall be no more.
- 10 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay
tribute, *

and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.

11 All kings shall bow down before him, *
and all the nations do him service.

12 For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in
distress, *
and the oppressed who has no helper.

13 He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; *
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.

14 He shall redeem their lives from oppression and
violence, *
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the work-

ing of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Ju-
dah;

for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and

learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

Robert brought me a neatly typed page of information about the Epiphany for which I thank him. It was a valuable reminder to me to focus more on the Epiphany than I had in my first draft. I tend to get lost running down rabbit holes, you know.

Every year, we celebrate the Epiphany, the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, without much fuss. We don't exchange gifts or have parties. When I was a boy, New Years was like that. My parents were tee-totalers. They didn't party. We would have a nice supper of pork and cabbage, watch a bit of TV, then go to bed. Shortly before midnight, the entire family rose to watch the ball drop in New York. As soon as it had done so, we two kids and dad would go out on the front lawn and shoot my grandfather's 12 gauge into the air. Why, in heaven's name, would we do such a daft thing? We

couldn't say. It's just what one did on New Years. All over the neighborhood you could hear the sounds of gunfire, and if we had polled the neighbors, my guess is that they had no idea why they were doing that, either. It was just something that was done to celebrate the new year.

If you were to research this custom, you would find that unloading your grandfather's 12 gauge on New Years Eve was believed to bring good luck in the coming year by frightening away evil demons. Demons. I guarantee you that we did not think about demons on those cold midnights when gunfire rang out all over an otherwise unremarkable suburban neighborhood. It was just something we did. That is critical. Shooting granddad's 12 gauge to scare off demons is an empty ritual, devoid of meaning. By contrast, the visit of the Magi, the Epiphany, is the revelation of the essential mystery

behind everything! We must never permit our worship of God to become empty ritual, but we're awfully good at that, as we confessed today:

Lord, we confess that we have been wrapped up on our secular celebration of Christmas. We have thoroughly enjoyed the music, the food, the swirl of activities. We have looked happily at the Christmas lights and decorations, and yet we have chosen to ignore the people who are most in need of compassion and assistance during this time.

Those of us who claim the name Christian must ever be on guard against empty rituals. We need also to be aware of what we mean when we confess that we “believe” in God. Belief is a tricky word.

Decades ago, I read somewhere that the word “belief” was made up of the verb “be” and the antique word “lief”, meaning preference. Assuming I remember that correctly, when we apply the word “belief” to God, we

wander perilously close to demanding that God be as we would prefer Him to be, thus stripping God of the very mystery which should drive us to our knees. To our shame, we allow “my God” to morph from the challenging “God that I worship, serve, and adore” to the much more agreeable “God as I prefer Him to be”. That means that it is laughably easy to overlook the challenge presented to one who seriously undertakes the name “Christian” and the obligations imposed by such an undertaking. Is it any wonder that Monsignor Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, observed:

“Maybe the greatest threat to the church is not heresy, not dissent, not secularism, not even moral relativism, but this sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic spirituality that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms.”¹

¹ From a 2007 lecture on preaching.

The birth of Jesus was about a titanic change in world history and the Epiphany about the revelation of that change to the entire world. Following a sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic God who makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, urges no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms is not the same as dedicating your life to the call of the mystery about which Paul wrote:

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation...

Paul was struck so forcefully by the mystery of which he speaks that he endured prison and martyrdom for it. We need to reconnect with the mystery as Paul experienced it, but we live in a radically different time and

place. It is laughably easy to attend church in our time and country. When we look back over 2,000 years, three languages (at least), and countless cultures to relate to the upset the birth of this child made, we're overwhelmed. For the people touched by this event, it made an end to the world to which they were accustomed and made a new beginning on unfamiliar, even frightening, ground. People were killed for suggesting that a new world had dawned, so threatening was such a thing to those who had not experienced the epiphany which Paul and those in his house churches experienced. You are their heirs, and your struggle is no less difficult. You must, as they did, bring the Incarnation into the world in which we live, a world which opposes the need for change with all the force at its command.

So with that background, let's revisit our tale from the first century. Paul tells us that he is in jail. He's writing

to a Gentile church, that is, one made up of people who don't share his Jewishness. The mystery has captured these Gentiles in a way they can't quite describe, and has led them away from everything familiar to their upbringing. Suddenly the world as they had known it previously is made visible to them as nothing more than an empty ritual that seeks to substitute for the vision of reality they have now been granted.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;

Our world, as well as Paul's, objects to mysteries.

Mysteries must be explained away so that the world may continue in its accustomed manner, but the birth of

this child has derailed that. However great our need to explain away the mystery in preferential terms, the mystery which drove Paul, which summoned the wise men, that led Mary and Joseph on their terrifying journey, remains. For us who will listen, there will be an Epiphany, an instant when the accustomed ways of the world as we have known it are revealed as empty ritual, no more significant than unloading Granddad's 12 gauge into the air. Then, we shall see with unclouded eyes. Then will be the beginning of your ministry.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Accepting the name Christian means a commitment to accept the reality given you, even though it is a mystery to you, and following it faithfully. Like Paul, you are to become a servant of the Gospel. Empty rituals, like unloading grandfather's shotgun on New Years, will accomplish nothing beyond scaring the neighbors. Oh, and under current law, that's a misdemeanor.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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