

Sermon: 1st Sunday after the Epiphany 2011

Manifestation

Epiphany is all about “manifestation.” Something becomes “outward” or “perceptible” when something is “manifest.” It is “made known.”

Hence, Jesus, through his baptism by John in the River Jordan, was made known to those present that he was something special. Mark’s Gospel portrays a dramatic scene of Jesus rising up out of the river, in which he was immersed for Baptism, and simultaneously the heavens are “torn apart,” and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove might descend. Adding to this drama is a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

That is a “Showing—a Manifestation” is there ever was one! Look at this scene carefully: there is John the Baptizer, baptizing Jesus...two human figures, and two different types of divine appearances: the Spirit (of God), descending like a dove—a dramatic visual occurrence—and an equally dramatic aural divine occurrence—the words which “came from heaven.”

Mark is certainly using all the senses to make a distinct statement. About what? About the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth.

ADULT Jesus

Today’s Gospel is about the baptism of an adult male, not a new born baby, about whom we have just celebrated the last 12 Days! It is a big jump in the story chronologically. It was only Friday, January 6, the feast of the Epiphany, when we focused on the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family, following the light of the great star in the East.

Now all of a sudden Jesus is all grown up, gets baptized and divine showings are happening. It may seem strange, but actually there is a reason: it is all about theology, not chronology.

The person who wrote the Gospel of Mark is thought to be the first person to write one of the four canonical gospels. (Not Matthew.) His gospel is the shortest. It is the most stark. His identity is unknown. He probably wrote this gospel in the late 60's. There is no story about the birth of Christ. His "in the beginning," begins with the story we hear today—with the baptism of Jesus by John.

It would be later, with Matthew and Luke, that the stories of the infant Jesus would be written. Mark's theological interest is not in how or where Jesus came to be, but that he was chosen by God to bring about the kingdom of God through his suffering and death. For Mark, it was through his baptism that the identity and role of Jesus was made manifest. "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" is the manifesto of Mark's theology about the nature of Jesus.

Gentiles

I called my brother on 12th Night to wish him a merry 12th night. At my words, "Happy 12th Night, Jack!" he responded with a pregnant silence. It was clear I was not connecting. "Could he not hear me?" I wondered. But he did. It just didn't mean anything to him. The fact that it meant nothing to him was a kind of epiphany to me. My retort to his silence was, "Don't you read *Shakespeare*?" Probably not an endearing thing to say to one's brother, but he forgave me instantly, I am sure.

I found myself telling him how we used to have 12th Night Parties at our house, about how much fun it was to have Will, my stepson—a chef—cook, and I would do all the rest. Clearly that was not a tradition in his household.

When I asked him if he had any idea about Epiphany, he conceded, "Yes, vaguely." Clearly it was something thought about long, long ago and was hardly relevant now other than the fact that his younger sister had some interest in it.

That is my epiphany—that the liturgical time we call “Epiphany and Sundays after Epiphany” it is really not well-known at all. It just took my brother to remind me of this reality. He isn’t against it—he just isn’t “into it.”

Maybe all the energy of people’s religious imagination and celebration is used up in the lead up to Christmas Day. At the strike of midnight, December 25, it is over, done, except maybe for disposing of the tree and putting away the decorations. Religious or spiritual awakenings that make Christmas appealing even to non-Christians seem to come to a halt. But there is so much more...but we need to tell the story to others, as the apostles told the story of Jesus to Jews and non-Jews alike.

We know there are 12 Days of Christmas, we know that the Feast of the Epiphany is January 6 every year, and we know that there are numerous Sundays after Epiphany before we get to the penitential season of Lent.

I suggest that we make known—make manifest—that there is a rich spiritual liturgical life after Christmas Day and before Easter. (And for that matter, between Easter and Christmas.) The best way I know to suggest that we tell this story is to tell it: mention to your friends and your family what is being focused upon at church through the readings and sermons. Invite people to take part. Engage in conversations and come to courses offered here and elsewhere to learn about the way the church uniquely crafts its worship (which includes music) and reaches out into the world through helping hands and generous hearts.

Tell about the myriad ways the liturgy (the way we worship) helps us to penetrate the depths of our spiritual selves and helps us form our moral compass. That moral compass is crucial in the way we lead every aspect of our lives. In business *and* in pleasure.

These suggestions, I believe, are ways that we Episcopalians can continue the tradition of those early disciples and apostles who took the

compelling presence of Jesus in the world seriously and promoted the Good News of his appearing. The early church decided to reach out to the Gentiles—not without much disagreement—and the world was changed as a result. Jesus’ message of loving God and neighbor as thyself was *the* message for everyone, everywhere. His unique salvific role was proclaimed by word and deed to all.

TIME

Time published a brief, but thoughtful publication called *100 Ideas That Changed the World: History’s Greatest Breakthroughs, Inventions and Theories in 2010*. Its methodology was chronological. Christianity, Apocalypse and St. Augustine’s *The City of God*—these three—are three out of 30 entries under the heading “The Ancient World.” In part, it reads, “In its first years, amid grotesque persecution, Christianity was spread across the Roman world through the inspired testimony of the disciples who had known Jesus. By the fourth century it had become the empire’s official religion. When Rome fell, the Catholic Church became the repository not just of Christ’s teachings but of civilized values, a role it maintained for centuries, weathering a great schism with the Eastern Orthodox Church and a Protestant Reformation that split it into a host of smaller sects. Today, more than 20 centuries after Christ’s death, Christianity remains of the most potent forces in the world.” (p. 30)

We are part of that “potent force.” It is our job to help others—in the spirit of the early church which reached out not only to Jews but to Gentiles—to understand the beauty of worshipping God together and the ongoing spiritual growth we experience as we share months and years of worship together as a family. We cannot take it for granted that everyone knows this. Everyone does not and some would like to know and be part of this great spiritual experience.

Be of great courage...tell someone about the course of your spiritual journey and how the church is an integral part of your life. You just

might be an agent of epiphany for someone searching for a deeper, more meaningful way of expressing spiritual yearnings, hopes and dreams.

Amen.

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