

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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EPIPHANY

6th January 2013

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Today is for us the last day of Christmas, the twelfth day, the day of twelve drummers drumming or lords-a-leaping, depending which version of the song you know. But for some Christians in the world this is Christmas day, mainly in Armenia. While in a larger part of the Christian world, this is Christmas Eve: in Ethiopia, Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, Macedonia, Moldova, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and in churches in the West which are of the traditions of these countries. It is all a matter of how you calculate your calendar, and whether you changed your celebration with the various calendar changes which have happened over the past 21 centuries.

For us it is the 12th day of Christmas, Epiphany. Some people call it Wise Men day. We have no more reason to think that the wise men came to Bethlehem twelve days after Jesus was born, than we have to think that Jesus was born on December 25th. The Biblical record, in Matthew, simply tells us that they came to the house where the child was (not the stable, but you wouldn't leave a baby in a stable any longer than you needed to) and that when Herod wanted to rid himself of this potential usurper, he killed all the boys in Bethlehem aged two or less. These are hardly facts to set a hard and fast date by. And the date doesn't matter. The date of Christmas or the date of Epiphany doesn't matter one little bit.

What matters is that Jesus came, that he was born among us as one of us - that's Christmas; and that he was revealed to the nations - that's Epiphany. What matters is that we celebrate these events, and celebrate them with joy rooted in understanding.

So what are we to understand about Epiphany? We read today two texts which are about epiphany. Epiphany is another word for a revelation, a dawning of light, in understanding and knowledge. "Arise, shine!" commands Isaiah, "For your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." He is talking to people mired in doubt and despair. He is talking to people who are far from their home, or who remain in a homeland which has been devastated by the defeats of war; who have seen their families scattered to the four winds, and have lost possessions, dignity and hope. Arise, Shine! They wouldn't feel much like it.

Isaiah acknowledges the darkness in which his people are living, but still he proclaims the light of God. It is a light which is given, not earned, which comes when it is most needed, and which, importantly, does not just illuminate, but transforms. It shines on the people and makes them also become lights to shine out to the world. They will shine out to the world and the world will flock, like moths, to their light. Like moths they will be unable to help themselves from coming to look, to wonder, and importantly, to bring tribute (gold, frankincense and myrrh), which means to submit themselves to God's new future, which is not just for one nation, but for the world.

That is part of the epiphany, the revelation of Christ. That is the part which we celebrate when we think of the story of the wise men travelling unknown distances to present gifts of devotion at the cradle of the infant Christ. But that is not the whole story. That the nations came to worship, in the shape of these representative magi, is the story, but not the whole truth of the matter. In the letter to

the Ephesians we find that truth broadened out widened by reflection on the story of the incarnation and the crucifixion and resurrection.

St. Paul acknowledges that there is a great mystery at the heart of God. A mystery is by definition something unknown or inexplicable. At the start of a new year we often ponder the mysteries that it will unfold to us, knowing that the days will indeed reveal them. In the past hundred and fifty years or so, the genre of mystery stories has grown up in literature. A story which revolves around a question - usually "Who done it?" And the reader expects to be baffled and led up the garden path and make wrong suppositions before all is revealed in the last chapter. But the enjoyment in these books is that although you may speculate or try to work out what the answer to the mystery is, you expect to have it revealed, in a burst of cleverness. Anything less is disappointing.

Before Christ's coming the unknown idea, fact, element at the heart of God was a true mystery - no one knew, no one could guess - most people didn't even know that it was there at all. But Christ's coming was the epiphany, the revelation - of God, of all of God - and so of the mystery which had been for so long concealed. And in this passage from Ephesians we read, were shown what this was. Paul, typically wraps it up in a lot of words - he tends to do this when he is excited about something, which can almost have the effect of burying the wonderful thing that he wants to tell us.

But here it is. I almost feel I should call for a trumpet blast or a fanfare from the organ. The mystery which Christ revealed, which is at the heart of God's being, is "Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

That is fantastic stuff! Don't ever let yourself think that this is just words, just boring, just a case of "Well of course." This says that at the heart of God, at the core of his being is the desire, the intention to include everyone in his family, in his kingdom, in his love. Everyone. This is at the very centre of God's intention and always was, it's not something added on later. God always intended to invite and make it possible for everyone to be in his family. You, of course, and me - and everyone. In Christ Jesus, and through the good news, which is his birth, death and resurrection, through what Paul elsewhere calls the faith (or faithfulness) of Christ, God's love and forgiveness and the new creation which began in Jesus is offered to everyone.

To get the full impact of this, you have to remember that until this explosive time in the first century, God had been the preserve of the Jewish people. That was what they thought and taught, anyway. Even Isaiah's visionary words are about people coming to Zion, to Jerusalem, to become part of the Jewish nation and worship. That would be wonderful enough. But what Paul tells us is far greater. Instead of drawing people in to become part of a national vision of God, which would mean that those born to that nation could presume a primacy, a superiority; God is reaching out to let his light shine in every corner and nation of the world, equally, with no favourites.

When Paul says that the Gentiles - the non Jews - have become fellow heirs and so on he uses the Greek prefix "syn". We still use it for some words. But more often we use the prefix "co" . and so we say that as non Jews we have become co-heirs, co-members of Christ's body, co-sharers in the promise. And that is important, because "syn", or "co" speaks of equality not of one party being superior or more important than the other. You and I are just as much part of God's chosen people as any Jew ever born. God truly has no favourites, and as we said recently, he does love each of us as though we were the only ones to love.

There are other parts of scripture which suggest that the Gentiles are late-comers to God's party, almost an afterthought. While Paul is still working out what this all means, while he is gradually having his taught and inbred Jewish presuppositions changed by the light of the gospel, he talks of our adoption into God's family, or of us as being a stem grafted onto the root stock of God's people. But now, late in his life, he has come to see that these images would not do justice to the full extent

of God's love shown us in Jesus. There are no first and second class citizens in God's kingdom. All are equally loved and equally important and equally welcome.

This epiphany, this revelation is not just a matter to rejoice in personally, although it certainly is that. It is also something that needs to be worked out in how we serve God and spread the good news. Ever since the day of Pentecost Christians have assumed that their way of worshipping, of living out the message is the only way. We see it in the book of Acts when there is a great stramash about whether Christians need to keep Kosher. Almost concurrently with that dispute in the Jerusalem church, the new Gentile church in Corinth is worried about whether or not they can eat meat which has previously been offered to idols. Then there are cultural expectations laid down as the rule regarding covering heads or the role of women. We sometimes hear talk of how the missionaries in the nineteenth century took westernisation as much as Christianity to Africa, India and China. And there is truth in that. But that sort of thing began right from the start. And as the gospel has been spread through the world it has come with what is often an unconscious cultural expectation - and it is over these cultural things that whole denominations have often fallen out.

We live in cultures, and they vary through history and geography, and the wonder of the truth in Jesus is that it speaks, he speaks, to every culture in relevant terms, if we will let him. Since the Bible has been translated into so many languages, since so many people have been enabled to read for themselves what the word of God actually says, then people have been better enabled to see what is Biblical and what is cultural. And this has led, not to a more uniform Christianity, but a more diverse one. If you go to Africa today, for instance, you will find the stereotypical churches which still cling to what the nineteenth century westerners taught them, singing Christmas hymns about ice and snow, worshipping in a style which is old fashioned even here now. But that is not all you will find, not what you will chiefly find. You will find many indigenous churches and denominations worshipping in all sorts of ways, from silence to what we might think of as chaos. All are welcome in God's family. All are equally welcome as expressions of God's Kingdom, if they place the saving work of Jesus Christ at the centre of what they do and say. And we, if we keep Jesus central, are just as welcome as them, just as valid a branch of God's family. That is the mystery which was hidden and is now revealed.

God sent Jesus for the whole world. That is the message of Epiphany. That means that we will not all look the same and celebrate the same. It means that Christmas will be on December 25th or January 6th or 7th, and that Easter too won't be on the same date for all of us. It means that we are part of a family far more diverse than some of us are comfortable with. But it means that comfortable or not, you are welcome, you are important.

In this year that has just started there will be all sorts of mysteries which will come into your life. But this mystery is revealed and its secret can help you with all the others. God loves you and in Jesus has shown his commitment to be with you, and with us, and with all his children, no matter what else comes into or goes from our lives.