

EPIPHANY 2017

“The Fellowship of the Mystery....” [Ephesians 3.9]

We still, sometimes, hear statements about the 'true' meaning of Christmass, and what actually follows, by way of explanation, is often *far* from the real meaning. Well, if Christmass causes difficulties, the 'true' meaning of Epiphany will prove even more troublesome. Usually what we celebrate at a Christian festival is an event, but sometimes - in the more recent festivals - we are only celebrating an idea. So, at Christmass, we have just observed our Saviour's birth (event); whereas in, say, the Festival of Christ the King, we are celebrating an idea, even a metaphor. In today's festival, however, we are commemorating not just an event but very much an idea; and not just one event either, but at least two, possibly several.

Today's readings, nevertheless, would seem to leave no room for confusion: today's 'event' is the coming of the Magi - except that we are confused about them as well. Very commonly they are said to be three kings, but there is no clear indication that there were three of them, and even less that they were royal personages. Their significance is this: that they were non-Jews, they had sufficient leisure and resources for an expedition of this kind, and sufficient status to be admitted into Herod's palace. The astral body is of comparable significance, although in modern scientific terms we are unlikely to say that it was a star as such. But 'star' does sound considerably better than resorting to the circumlocution of 'astral body' - one is forced to admit. Its significance is that the admission of the Gentiles into the “fellowship of the mystery” is not an after-thought, but a fore-thought, on God's part. The Gentiles had to wait for many millennia together before they could join the party, but this was no indication that God was reluctant to have them.

And this is what the Latin celebration is: the manifestation of the true God to the Gentiles, for this is what that unfamiliar Greek word means - "manifestation." And it is for this reason that we choose to sing that not terribly catchy hymn [“Songs of thankfulness and praise” EH47] by Bp. Wordsworth. Yes, it is not a great tune, but the words are important, and they introduce that other difficulty: one event or two . . . or even more? Now the event that our Greek and Cypriot friends kept yesterday - and which the Russians, Serbs, and Old Calendarists will keep in 12 days' time - is the Lord's Baptism. The idea (as idea) is very much the same, but the event is entirely different. The idea is still that of manifestation, but what is made manifest is not the potential inclusion of all the non-Jewish peoples into God's plan, but the Personal intercourse within the Godhead. The Byzantine hymns are at pains to relate how there was the Eternal Son made flesh, who was being baptized, the Voice of the Eternal Father, and the emblem (a dove) of the Holy Ghost. This is momentous, of course, but not, as such, disclosed to Gentiles - certainly not to influential ones - and possibly not recognized for the revelation that it was until far later into Patristic times. But these are the manifestations in question: the nature of God, and the nature of His plan, and, quite obviously, they are not competing interpretations. We concentrate on the plan, whilst the rest of the church focusses on the revelation of God's nature.

Now I realise that this is a slight over-simplification because many tomorrow will be celebrating either the (postponed) feast of the magi or the Baptism of the Lord - but that is a very new development indeed. Well, is that not a really good development, something that even a crusty old ritualist such as myself should applaud? Yes, possibly, but I can't help but be wistful at the disappearance of the story of the Lord's disappearance - as given by Luke and appointed in the Book of Common Prayer. It is the only later infancy story that we have - I'm not counting the romances to be found in the non-canonical, so-called gospels. And it is an intriguing story, that our Blessed Lord identifies Himself with the Jerusalem Temple. It speaks of how it is the Lord's Person whom we are to regard as the only true temple and the only possible sacrifice. So, yes, I am sad to lose that - not that we here have, of course. That is the reading that we will have tomorrow.

Over Christmass I was asked about why it was that our Blessed Lord was baptized. It is a question with which even the Gospel writers appeared to struggle. They make it as plain as possible that John the Baptist, notwithstanding his tremendous importance, is a lesser figure. In early Patristic times it caused further confusion because there were some (whom we now class as heretics) who said that

this was the point at which Jesus became God's Son, that God adopted Him to be His unique Agent. Now, dear brethren in Christ, dear boys and girls, I do not want you to think that! The Eternal Son of God was indissolubly and absolutely united, in the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary from the outset, to the humanity of Him Who would be named Jesus. This is what true believers know, and, indeed, this highlights the usefulness of tomorrow's Gospel about Jesus in the Temple. He was always about His Father's business or - if you prefer - in intention and Divinity, He never left His Father's house. Nevertheless, the idea of God having *adopted* the man Jesus at the Baptism - although quite, quite wrong - is an understandable error. The Baptism had to be for some purpose.

Well, one explanation given quite often is that this was our Blessed Lord identifying with our sinful situation. Newman once preached on our Lord as the *Real Penitent*, and underlined his meaning by saying that our Lord thoroughly identified with sinful men to the extent that He was everything to and with them except the Real Sinner. His idea was that, although we may (or may not) feel shame for our sins, the one who will feel the greatest sense of shame is the one who loves us most. Again, it must be underlined very firmly, loudly, that our Blessed Lord committed no sin whatsoever - (some even claim that John the Baptist didn't either). Yet the Lord identified with our sin and offered - to utilize a very technical word - *vicarious* penitence and *vicarious* sacrifice for us. Our blessed Lord is often referred to as the 'sinner's Friend' - and so He is. We might add that John the Baptist is a friend as well. He was the dour friend of sinners. Indeed our Blessed Lord makes a play on this contrast between the austere Baptist and Himself: "John came fasting and you said, 'see, a fanatic.' The Son of Man came feasting and you said, 'See, a wine-bibber and a friend of sinners.'" Our Blessed Lord does not just issue warnings about sin and repentance, though He does, He actually identifies with our struggles with them.

Furthermore, in that Patristic, emblematic-expository tradition, the Baptism of Christ was understood in (so-to-say) "reversed perspective." Everyone else who came to Jordan's waters declared their intention to have their sins washed away. Our Blessed Lord, on the other hand, cannot wash away - even in intention - what He does not have. In His case, it is the Sacred Humanity that consecrates the waters. And that is the leading idea of throwing the Holy Cross into the sea, or into rivers, in Orthodox countries. This is the consecration of the waters from the radiance and innocence of Christ. Incidentally, for those not familiar with how this custom is conducted, the Holy Cross is not discarded in the waters, it has to be retrieved. And this has become a rather 'matcho' display, with vigorous young men diving in after the Cross to restore it.

The idea of Christ Himself consecrating the waters may sound fanciful – even alien to the character of the New Testament – but Christ is known in his contact with the elements of His creation (for "the world was made by him"). He is baptised in water, he turns the water into wine, and, at length, turns the wine into His very blood! He reveals Himself not just in words, but in events, as the re-Creator.

Classically speaking, a sermon should have three points, neither more nor less. An Epiphany sermon cannot but have a very great many points because this is the nature of this particular festival. It is one of our oldest and greatest festivals, and it is sad that it is not better observed, but perhaps people tend to reel at the multiplicity of ideas and events contained within that obscure Greek word. What I might suggest that you take away from this complexity is that Almighty God has in His Unique Son taken our situation in life into Himself, that we might, through His grace, give ourselves to Him.

I said on Christmass Day that those impressive, and deceptively simple, words of Christina Rossetti "What I can, I give Him, give my heart" are not the whole truth; because we cannot give Him our heart or anything else without Him showing us how, and enabling us to do it by His grace. Today, this, indeed, is what is set before us. God not just in our world as a distinguished visitor, but as a magnet drawing us into Himself and into the salvation that He came to impart - at length, to make us partakers of the divine Nature.