

Are we the Light?

Preached on The First Sunday after the Epiphany
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Jan. 10, 2021

Text: Romans 12:1-5

We are now in the season of the Epiphany, where we celebrate our Lord's manifestation, his showing forth; the appearing of the new Sun of Righteousness, the light which shines in the darkness, the light which all this world's darkness can never overcome. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4.6) That is the theme of the Epiphany: the shining forth of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Many events in the Gospels are particularly associated with the Epiphany. First, of course, there is the coming of the star-led Magi, the wise men from the East, who bring their gifts of gold, and incense, and myrrh, acknowledging the infant as King, as God, and as Sacrifice. Then there is the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, with the visible descent of the Spirit, and the declaration of his divine sonship. And on the Sundays after Epiphany the Gospel lessons are chiefly concerned with the miracles of Jesus, in which his divine power is manifest.

But on this first Sunday after Epiphany, we have the story of Jesus' visit to the Temple at Jerusalem, at the age of twelve, and his conversation with the doctors, "both hearing them, and asking them questions." It's the only story the Gospels give us of the childhood of Jesus, and it is an interesting and remarkable story in many ways. But the chief point of it, as our Gospel lesson states, is the showing forth of divine wisdom. His divine power will be shown in his miracles presented through the remainder of the Epiphany season. But Jesus is also the wisdom of God, and that is what we are invited to consider today: Christ as the Epiphany of the wisdom of God.

In the Scriptures, and especially in the Epistles of St. Paul, the wisdom of God is often contrasted with the wisdom of this world, or the wisdom of this present age:

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?... For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1.19-25)

His point is that the enfleshment of God in Christ, his suffering and dying for our salvation, is a fact which stands in contradiction to all worldly wisdom, to all worldly calculation and expectation, in contradiction to all the schemes our cleverness might devise. The wisdom of God, in Christ, breaks in upon us as a contradiction, and gives us a new knowledge, a new starting-point or perspective. And our life as Christians is radically dependent upon that knowledge, that revelation of divine wisdom. "Be not conformed to this world (to the wisdom of this present age), but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

The temptations to conformity are ever with us. Even if we are raised in Christian homes, we are catechized into two different faiths almost immediately: Christian faith and the world's faith. The World presses in upon us, and moves us in directions ultimately at odds with a true Christian witness, though we are often unaware of this. At church we are taught about service to others, dying to self, and that we were bought with a price. Everywhere else we are told that we are our own, that we should be autonomous, that no one has authority over us, that our "rights" trump any and all moral claims of others.

But here we have Paul entreating us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, for only in this way can we truly be obedient to God. Our thoughts, our feelings, our desires are all infected with sin, and this infection has taken root in our bodies. We are to allow God to destroy *all* the vileness that has taken up residence there. In Romans 6:12-13, Paul declares:

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."

My very hands, eyes, and feet must be presented to God; henceforth, I must live as one who acts using holy instruments. The assumption of my bodily autonomy and self-possession is challenged at its root when my very limbs and organs are dedicated to God's service.

Because we as Christians have presented ourselves for sacrifice, we are to put to death all that is worldly in us. These are not only things like sexual immorality, gluttony, and drunkenness, but also things like impurity, anger, malice, slander, lying, and idolatry. These latter are all sins in which many Christians in America have heartily indulged in these past four or five years. They have been given license to act this way by their idolatry of certain narratives that claim God's sanction. But however pure one likes to think his or her motivations are, nothing justifies disobeying God; for He is our only true and final authority. Suppressing your Christian conscience in the service of some worldly goal, no matter how laudable you are convinced it is, does great damage to the witness of the Church. Christians are supposed to be bearers of the truth and wisdom of God, not tools of the powerful who spread lies and encourage division. Our collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas says that God "has poured upon us the new light of [His] incarnate Word." What does the world see when it looks at Christians today? The

light of God in His children, as they show His love in self-sacrificing ways; or just another special interest unconcerned with anyone but themselves? We cannot, on the one hand, divide ourselves up into a worldly self which behaves like everyone else, and, on the other, a “religious” self we parade around in on Sundays. When we give ourselves to God, we give Him everything, not just some vague “spiritual” part.

We have “put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” (Col. 3: 9-10) This is what a renewal of the mind entails. We are seeking to become like God in every way, including how He views the world. Therefore, we should be seeking to have the mind of Christ. We are to critique *all* of our dispositions, loves, attitudes, and patterns of thought, not just the ones we view as quirks that *might* need fixing. None of them are sacrosanct; though we often treat them like they are.

It is God’s will that we be *fully* transformed, not just given a few chiropractic adjustments and sent on our way. And we are transformed by “putting on Christ”, by allowing the wisdom of God, the mystery hidden from the foundation of the world, to take up residence within us, our souls and bodies.

"For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1.9-10)

And that wisdom is ours, to believe, to understand, and to make our own, by the renewing of our mind, that we may prove what is God's will.

In the series of Gospel lessons for the Epiphany Sundays, first comes the Epiphany of divine wisdom, then the Epiphany of divine power in the miracles. And that order is vitally important, for, as today's collect puts it, first we must perceive and know what things we ought to do, and then we must have grace and power to do them. The development of perception and knowledge necessarily comes first—for power without wisdom, action without godly moral perception, is spiritually deadly. The tendency of our age, the wisdom of this world, and the temptation of the Church, is towards self-worship, self-interest, and personal comfort. Christians, of all people, should flee from this. *Be not conformed!*

The Incarnate Lord, the enfleshed word of God, shines forth as a light in the darkness; and despite all our failures, inconsistencies, and perversities, the darkness can never overcome that light. Let us then look to that light which is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." May our minds be renewed in that vision, so that we may truly manifest Christ to those who do not believe.

In the Name...