

“A Scandalous Revelation!”

Sunday, January 3, 2010: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14; Eph. 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany of our Savior Jesus Christ. Epiphany, which actually falls on Wednesday, January 6, marks the end of the Christmas season.

Everybody knows about Christmas and Easter, they're the two big celebrations of the Church year. Some folks even manage to include attending church for those celebrations! But for the first three centuries of Christianity, it was not Easter and Christmas, but Easter and Epiphany, that were the huge Church feasts.

It was not until the reign of the Emperor Constantine that the date of December 25th was chosen as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth and the day became a feast. Until that time, it was Epiphany that was a joyous holiday. Remnants of that old pattern can still be found in Latino and Eastern Orthodox cultures where Epiphany celebrations far surpass the Christmas day festivities. What was it about the Epiphany that initially made it more important than the birth of the Christ child?

The word epiphany means, “to show forth,” or “to reveal something,” that is new. Epiphany is described by many Christians as “an AHA moment,” that moment when the light bulb goes on in our heads, when something is made crystal clear.

Matthew's Gospel is the only one that contains the story of the Epiphany. In Matthew, we are told that three wise men came from the east; most scholars believe they were from Persia, which is modern day Iran. These “wise men” were likely Zoroastrian priests, which meant they were astrologers and magicians; the Harry Potter's of their day. The most salient point of all this information is to say the three wise men were *not* Jews; they were Gentiles.

The theme of the Gospel of Matthew's entire message is clearly established from this story of the early visitors to the Holy Family. Jesus was the **King** of kings – to be worshiped by all people. He was also different from all other kings. His true identity was revealed – in other words the epiphany, that “aha,” moment – was made first to “outsiders,” or the “unclean people,” before it was made manifest to the people of Israel. Because of that the story of the visitation of the three gentile Magi was indescribably scandalous to Matthew's early hearers. But also because of that, Epiphany was considered good news of great joy for all people; which is why it was a major feast in the early Church!

As an aside: just imagine how scandalous it would be today if three learned men from Iran proclaimed that some Jewish baby in Israel was the savior of the world? Imagine the reaction of the Iranian ayatollah's and President Amahdinejah to that news!

Having Jesus be sought out by foreigners who worshipped a different god was radically significant to the message of Matthew's Gospel. What this conveyed to Matthew's predominantly Jewish audience was that Jesus' identity and purpose was revealed to Gentiles as well as Jews; in fact other than the shepherds in the fields, it was revealed to gentiles *before* it was widely made known to Jews. That meant that the wall between Jews and Gentiles was to be broken down by this tiny child in a manger.

You see the Jewish understanding of scripture was that they, the Jews, were God's chosen people; in fact God's *only* chosen people. If the Messiah was revealed to Gentiles even before He was to the Jews, then the Gentiles occupied an equal place in God's created order; and that was radically different from what the Jews believed. As St. Paul later told the church in Ephesus, “in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

This scandalous epiphany means Jesus came to save EVERYONE, Jew and Gentile. It is scandalous because in Matthew's day there were only two groups of people, Jews and Gentiles; the ins and the outs, and you were either one or the other.

But the visitation by the Magi is witness that Jesus came to save everyone. That means He came to save you, and He came to save me.

In some ways it would be less difficult to consider that Jesus came to save everyone than it can be to consider that He came to

save me. I know my life history only too well. I know the sins I've committed; the people I've hurt; the thoughts I have had. Well maybe I should think that through again. I probably don't know the number of sins I've committed or the number of people I've hurt. Those things just span over too many years and I - like most people - have engaged in some revisionist personal history.

This may come as a surprise to hear from a clergy person, but sometimes it's really hard to believe that Jesus came into the world to save me. I know I don't deserve it. No matter how many times I've confessed my sins, I've never been able to name them all, and as soon as I've confessed the ones I can think of, I've done something else to replace the sins I've confessed. So it's hard to believe that Jesus came to save me from all that sinning. But He did. Again from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works"

The truth is that Jesus came into the world to save me and you and everyone out in Cleveland and beyond. That's simultaneously a very humbling thought as well as an empowering one. Jesus came into the world to save me. His death and resurrection ransomed my life from the power of sin and death and have set me free. People who are free are not held back and can accomplish great things. That's empowering. But the problem is His coming to save everyone creates some disturbing consequences for our limited, human understanding of things. Not everybody *wants* Jesus to save everyone. Not everyone thinks everyone is worthy of being saved.

But the difficult truth is that Jesus came into the world to save you and you and you; He came to save everyone. What this means is that every fire and brimstone, Bible thumping televangelist preacher who tells you that he or she knows who is going to hell, is wrong. That means every cleric who pontificates about theirs being the one and only Church that leads to salvation, is wrong. That means that every religion that says that only its members are God's chosen people and beloved of God, are wrong.

Jesus offered Himself in sacrifice once, for all humanity and for all time. That means that there is salvation for every human being. No one – not you, not me, certainly not any fundamentalist preacher, or bishop, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, or anyone at the Vatican, or any rabbi, or ayatollah, or imam, or some state theocracy gets to judge who is worthy of the glory of God's everlasting love. Jesus determined that on the cross.

By the grace of God, we've been redeemed.

But along with that reality is the equal reality that the people who we don't like, or despise, or who repel us, or lead lifestyles we don't agree with, or even those who commit heinous crimes, have been redeemed as well. Murderers, people who prey on retired people, Fred Phelps, Saddam Hussein, Bernie Madoff, the Nigerian man who tried to blow up the Northwest airways plane on Christmas– all have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God loves us all as God's very own creation. We are all children of the Living God.

This is the truly hard part if we take our Christian faith seriously. It's why all too many Christians have tried to parse this scriptural truth about the Epiphany to meet their own needs and not God's, it can be hugely discomfiting to think that all people are beloved of God. But as St. Paul told the church in Rome, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So does this mean we will see people in heaven who have engaged in despicable behavior? Will the most heinous or unsavory people we can think of be seated around the same banquet table with Jesus? I doubt it. Those folks have so far removed themselves from God's grace that they no longer know how to receive it. But the point is, *I don't know who will be in heaven*, and it's not my job to make that determination. That is way above my pay-grade! God's ways are beyond our ways and clearly beyond our comprehension.

Here's what I believe. All of God's love for us is shown through the salvation offered to us by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. That salvation has been given us. All we have to do is receive it. It was given to us by the grace of God and therefore we can do nothing to earn it. We simply have to accept it.

Will Anthony Sowell, or those who committed genocide in Rwanda or, the 9/11 terrorists, or any other despicable human beings accept this grace of God, probably not – but I don't know that for sure. That's in God's hands. It's not my job to figure out what conditions those people have to satisfy to be worthy of God's grace. None of us is worthy. Not one. But despite our unworthiness we have received salvation through grace anyway. For that we should be deliriously thankful.

So the next time someone tries to tell you who is blessed and who is cursed in this world; the next time you read or hear about how someone is going to hell because he or she doesn't believe, or look or behave the same as the person doing the judging, remember this homily. Remember the Epiphany of our Savior Jesus Christ and what it meant – and what it means today. God became a human and lived as one of us – and died on a cross – and rose again – *for all of us*. Christ Jesus is the Savior of the world – even the parts we don't like. And that is an Epiphany the world needs to embrace.

Amen