

## **BECOMING AN EPIPHANY PEOPLE**

### **Epiphany – Cycle C: Is. 60:1-6; Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14; Eph. 3:1-12; Mt. 2:1-12**

On June 6 last year as part of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Governor-General David Johnston presented to Queen Elizabeth II a life-size portrait of herself, a gift commissioned from Canadian artist Phil Richards by the Government of Canada. The portrait shows the Queen standing by a desk in Rideau Hall, a Canadian flag to her left, and a portrait in the background of Queen Victoria, Elizabeth's great-great-grandmother, the only other British monarch to have reigned for sixty years.

Our government, presenting the Queen with such a gift, echoes an age-old tradition of countries honouring one another, usually through their heads of state, at significant passages in their national life. The custom is mentioned in our psalm today which is, quite possibly, a coronation prayer for King Solomon. The psalm mentions that at the state occasion for which the psalm was written, the kings of Tarshish, Sheba, and Seba brought him gifts, presumably gifts of great worth. And following this tradition, Matthew, in today's Gospel, reports on the visit of the magi to the Christ Child with a gift of gold – certainly a precious gift still today; another gift of frankincense, an aromatic tree resin burned in temple worship; and finally, a gift of myrrh, also a tree resin which can be burned, although the smell of myrrh is quite pungent. Myrrh is also known to have been processed as an oil used in biblical times for anointing the dead at the time of burial. Jesus' gift is usually assumed to have been oil of myrrh.

The tradition of considering the magi to be kings derives from this custom of monarchs presenting gifts to other monarchs. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew is concerned that Jesus be recognized as God's Messiah, a worthy successor to David, Israel's greatest king. Matthew, however, never identifies the magi as kings: he calls them wise men. The gift of gold suggests that at least one of them had significant wealth, and could, perhaps, have been a king or head of state. Matthew is mute on the point. He allows his readers to draw their own conclusions. Incidentally, he also does not tell us that there were three: because there were three gifts, tradition has concluded there were three visitors.

The gifts of frankincense and myrrh are interesting, though. Certainly they were costly gifts, but also somewhat unusual. Frankincense suggests Jesus' religious vocation, since the burning of incense was synonymous with Jewish temple ritual: incense, offered in both the morning and evening at the temple of Jerusalem, burned continuously; the smell was strongly associated with worship of the One God. The gift of myrrh foreshadows Jesus' death and, as such, reinforces the dramatic tension we experience throughout the gospels – tension caused not only by Jesus' conflict with the religious authorities, but also by symbols and omens. The gift of myrrh, given to him at his birth, is a jarring symbol.

Becoming an Epiphany people, we can't help noticing, means being generous and gracious. The magi could easily have visited the Christ Child without bringing gifts, but they didn't! They anticipated celebrating a momentous event in world history, and bringing a gift expressed the joy, excitement, and anticipation they felt.

Christina Rossetti's celebrated hymn, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, which we sang last on Christmas Eve, suggests that Christians are Epiphany people; that our Christmas celebrations are an attempt to express our joy and excitement over Jesus' birth; that in celebrating Christmas, we take our place beside the magi; that as disciples of the One we worship, we, too, are called to be generous and gracious. The conflict she identifies, however, is our poverty, relative to the magi and shepherds who visit Jesus. We don't even have a lamb to offer, she notes, as one of the shepherds might have offered. She solves the problem for us at the very end of the last verse by suggesting that we do, in fact, have a gift; we can give our heart to Jesus. As one of our communion prayers says, we can live in him and he can live in us. For me, Christina Rossetti's hymn is a profound Midrash (or commentary) on Epiphany. Epiphany, she suggests, calls us beyond generosity and graciousness to the sacrificial love Jesus himself calls us to in the gospel he proclaims.

Becoming an Epiphany people means becoming welcoming and inclusive, we discover in today's readings. It may be most explicit in the letter to the Ephesians in which the author identifies Jesus' work of including Gentiles, not just Jews, in God's plan of salvation. The gospels do not give the mission to the Gentiles as much prominence as does the Letter to the Ephesians. It is true, however, that Jesus,

sometimes with a little resistance, saw all people as the children of God. In the early church, however, Jesus was quickly seen as God's new covenant; that Gentiles, too, could become the children of God, a covenant people in other words, through faith in Christ Jesus who was, of course, Jewish. The two millennia tradition of Christianity has overshadowed the controversy that existed during Jesus' and Paul's lifetime when Gentiles were considered to be beyond covenant and beyond salvation. We don't feel the same tension or separation that Gentiles felt in Jesus' day.

What is interesting, though, is that the magi, because they came "from the East" are undoubtedly Gentiles worshipping the Jewish Messiah. And this fulfills, among other things, the vision from Hebrew scripture advanced in this morning's First Reading from Isaiah. The prophet writes of the people of Israel, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." People will flock to Israel, to Jerusalem, we see in the image of the multitude of camels covering the land – camels carrying people, belongings and, incidentally, gifts of gold and frankincense, gifts from the Gentile peoples of Midian, Ephah, and Sheba. Throughout much of Isaiah, Israel is identified as a light to the nations – a light to Gentiles, in other words – complemented with an end-times vision of all the nations of the world streaming to Israel's holy mountain, Jerusalem. As sectarian as Judaism became in practice, its blueprint was that it should become a means of salvation, even a suffering servant, for all people; that the God of Israel was the one, true God whose will was to bless all the people of the world.

Epiphany revives this vision, and for us to become an Epiphany people, we must first recognize that we are the people of God because of the saving work of Jesus Christ; and then we must do everything we can to continue the tradition of enlarging the circle to include more and more people.. Love for all people stands at the heart of both the Jewish and Christian faith. Epiphany calls us to acknowledge that especially in Christ Jesus, the barriers are taken down. On our watch, the love of God must not be reserved for some and not others.

Finally, becoming an Epiphany people means that we identify God as the world's true light. As the manger was the sign of Christ's birth for the shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside, so the star of Bethlehem was the sign of Christ's birth for the magi. It was, apparently, a brilliant light shining in the dark night sky, and it was for the magi a heavenly sign marking an extraordinary earthly event. The sky, the so-called heavens, even today with over 50 years of space exploration behind us, move us to awe and wonder; lead us to contemplation of the magnificence of the Creator and to existential questions concerning our place in the cosmos. Staring up at the night sky millennia ago, the psalmist asked of God,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

But the heavenly light, the star of Bethlehem, the light in the darkness, signifies for people of faith the presence of God through metaphor. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, we sing at Evening Prayer, knowing, even as we sing, that the darkness we acknowledge is not merely the darkness of night – but also the darkness of sin, the darkness of sickness and death, the darkness of doubt and despair, the darkness of separation and abandonment, the darkness of unknowing. In many ways, we live in a dark world, and often we participate in creating that darkness. Especially then, we recognize the depth of the metaphor; especially then, we understand God and God as revealed in Christ Jesus as the one, true light. "Lighten *our* darkness," we pray at Evening prayer to the one, true God.

Becoming an Epiphany people means looking to God as the light shining in the darkness, the light no darkness can overcome. Becoming an Epiphany people means claiming the power of God's light for ourselves, no matter how dark our circumstances might be; and recognizing in claiming God's light for ourselves that God's light is transformational; that in following the one, true light, we become people of light; people whose light is available for others who battle the darkness of sin, the darkness of sickness and death, the darkness of doubt and despair, the darkness of separation and abandonment, the darkness of unknowing.

Becoming an Epiphany people means becoming generous, gracious, welcoming, inclusive, and children of the light. The good news of the gospel is that we are not alone in becoming such: God searches for

us and for our souls as surely as the magi searched for the Christ Child. God loves us into salvation. And the birth of Jesus is the pledge, the essential and definitive sign that we are not alone.