

## St. James' Church Epiphany 2011

From the Letter to the Ephesians ~

*....this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.*

In my first Parish, in eastern Ontario, I had a number of parishioners who were permanent residents of the chronic care ward of the local hospital. One of them, a woman named Eliza, had become extremely crippled with arthritis, to the point that she could do almost nothing without assistance. She was often distressed by what she saw as her uselessness, felt that she was no good to anyone. Eventually, even talking became very painful and difficult. But at the end of every visit, she would insist that we say the Lord's Prayer together. Eliza would struggle to get out the words, often with tears pouring down her cheeks.

Eliza was in a room with three other women, all of them physically and mentally incapacitated. But when we would say the Lord's Prayer, even the woman with advanced Alzheimers, who could not even remember her own name, would join in with a few of the words. If there were other visitors in the room, they would stop whatever they were doing and join in as well. It took quite some time to get through the prayer....but it was holy and sacred time. I can still remember Eliza's face when we would finish - tears on her cheeks, and light shining in her eyes. Her prayer was a gift out of all she had to give, the best gift she could offer, and her gift illuminated that dreary chronic care room and lives of all the people gathered in it, and revealed something about all four women living their days out in that room. Revealed something which would otherwise have remained hidden.

At St. John the Evangelist in Kitchener, our previous parish, Lorne and I were involved in the re-settlement of a family from Kosovo. These seven people – grandparents, parents and three teen-age children arrived in Canada with some clothes and not much else. One evening, a couple of weeks after they moved into their small Kitchener townhouse, we dropped by for a visit. Within 10 minutes of our arrival, plates and bowls laden with food were brought from the kitchen and spread before us; glasses were filled with gingerale, and as the

family sat around beaming hospitality, they exhorted us in their limited English to dig in. What was spread before us constituted almost everything in their kitchen, and they were fully prepared for us to eat it all, even if it meant that they would have to go without. We had arrived feeling pretty good about what *we* had been able to do for this family, and we sat in there, in that tiny living room, profoundly humbled, as we were offered absolutely the best that they had, a gift of generosity which revealed something about them.....and something about us.

From the Gospel of Matthew we hear a familiar story of gift-giving, a story which in its present form is perhaps partly factual, but which is primarily symbolic and mythological. Three people come from places far away – three people who represent the Gentiles, ie. those outside the Jewish community. Some 30 years before Matthew’s Gospel was written, we know that there were great arguments amongst those first Christians about whether or not even to take the good news about Jesus to no-Jews. Peter and Paul debated long and hard, Peter being quite against the idea, and it was decided that Paul would go off as a missionary to the Greek-speaking Gentile world.

By the year 70, when Matthew’s Gospel was written, the mission to the Gentiles was flourishing, and it seems to have been important for Matthew that this idea of Christ being shared with outsiders had been part of the plan from the beginning. So we have these mysterious, unnamed figures from “the East” .....

.....and they offer gifts to the Christ Child - the best gifts they have to give.....gold, frankincense, myrrh. Symbolic gifts - gold for a king; frankincense/incense for God; myrrh to anoint the body of one who has died. Through the giving of these gifts, the best they could offer, some of the glory and purpose and destiny of the Christ Child is illuminated, revealed, made known for the first time.

To use the word of the season, it is an “epiphany”, a “showing forth” a “manifesting”, a revealing of something new. The liturgical colour will soon change to green - a good growing colour. From the scriptures over the coming weeks we will hear how Jesus’ ministry grows, how the Gospel spreads. We will hear how God’s purposes for God’s people begin to be revealed.

The season of Epiphany is an opportunity for us as individuals and as a community to think about how we respond to God's call to us. In three weeks' time we will gather for our annual Vestry meeting, a time not simply to reflect on what is coming in and going out financially, but more importantly to ask ourselves what God is calling this community of St. James to do and to be; where are the places in our parish life in which we are responding to the will of God? For these we can rejoice and give thanks. Where are the new places, the new directions to which God is calling us? Are there changes to be made? These are the places of invitation, of challenge and opportunity.

How can we, in our exploring, sharing and celebrating be, in the words of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a church through which the rich variety of the wisdom of God be made known? The words "rich variety" suggest so many possibilities for creativity and growth, possibilities for fellowship and nurturing, possibilities for prayer, worship and study.

When we respond to God's call in our lives, WE become an epiphany; we manifest or show forth through our lives, individually and communally, the presence and power of God at work in the world. Our Baptismal Covenant – those promises we renew every time we celebrate a baptism - with its questions about what we believe, and how we intend to act out what we believe, challenges us to respond to God through being living our lives "epiphanally", to show forth Christ's glory through our daily living.

We respond to God by offering the best that we have. For each one of us, the "best" is something different. And the best is not measured in terms of size or skill or ability or prestige or cost. The "best" happens when we give - whatever it is - from a loving heart, out of a spirit of thankfulness. This is giving which grows out of the presence of Christ residing in each of us. Whenever and wherever we give in this way, the glory of God shines through, and Christ is revealed through us.

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