

I'm going to start this sermon in the middle and then go back to the beginning before I get to the end. Don't worry; you'll see what I mean. And such a structure is very much in the spirit of Epiphany.

Today, January 6th, has been celebrated in the Church for centuries as the Feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany, for those of you not up on your etymology, comes from a Greek word, *επιφανεια*, literally meaning "to shine forth." The word also had the connotations of "to show forth" or "appear," which is the root of its English meaning today. We also use the word to mean, "a moment of sudden intuitive understanding; flash of insight." But initially, in Greek and in English, epiphany had to do with the appearance of a god and particularly for Christians, of course, the appearance of Christ Jesus.

If you trace the history of the celebration of Epiphany in Church history, you'll find that the feast probably originated in the Eastern Churches, those in Asia Minor, Syria and Armenia. For them, it was connected with the first appearance of Jesus as the Son of God, at his baptism when his nature was revealed by the appearance of the Holy Spirit and by the utterance of the Father from heaven. Later, the Feast of Epiphany in the East also became associated with Christ's first appearance (or epiphany) as a miracle worker – the wedding at Cana. As the observance of this celebration moved west, into the sphere of the Church of Rome where Christmas was a greater celebration than in the East, it became associated with the Christmas story and the first appearance of Christ to the Gentiles, the visit of the Magi.

By medieval times in Western Europe, Epiphany was squarely established as the end point of the twelve day long season of Christmas, from whence we get our beloved carol with the leaping lords and the drumming drums and the golden rings and a partridge in a pear tree. Some scholars believe that it absorbed older pagan observances at the beginning of the solar year. It was, according to sources, "a period for peace and truce in all social conflicts and a time when you were supposed to be particularly hospitable and kind to others. All houses were supposed to open their doors to the poor and welcome them to share their food." This last became particularly associated with the Feast of St. Stephen on December 26th (the deacon Stephen, after all, being responsible before his martyrdom for feeding widows and orphans on behalf of the apostles), something that we may remember when we sing of Good King Wenceslas, who "went out on the Feast of Stephen" to help a poor man. Nowadays, that tradition is observed in Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries as Boxing Day, when neighbors visit each other with gifts.

Of that whole Christmas season, however, the merriest merrymaking was reserved for Twelfth Night, the night of the twelfth day of Christmas that led into Epiphany. The festivities included a "Lord of Misrule," who organized the silliness and the feast. Roles were often reversed for the feast, with masters serving servants, men dressing as women and so forth. That reversal of social structure is what makes this upside-down sermon particularly appropriate. It had good theological underpinnings, too, if you think about how the dawning Kingdom of God under Christ so often reversed human expectations. As theatre was reborn in Europe, it became a standard part of the fun to act out the visit of the Magi, then to produce more elaborate morality plays and, later, secular masques and comedies. All of this fun reached its pinnacle during Tudor and Elizabethan times with the ultimate Epiphany entertainment coming in 1601 with the premiere of William Shakespeare's play, Twelfth Night. Soon after that, of course, all the fun

Lessons of Twelfth Night

stopped for a goodly while in England as the Puritans came to power, chopped off the king's head, closed the theatres and banned the celebration of Christmas. The Puritans who came to America, incidentally, whom we remember as the Mayflower Pilgrims, also banned the celebration of Christmas in their domain, a cheery little nugget of history you should feel free to share with anyone waxing sentimental over the glories of theocracy in Colonial America. But I digress...

Shakespeare's Twelfth Night is, on many levels, the perfect Elizabethan Epiphany play. Before we begin to make thematic connections between the play and the Christian celebration, however, perhaps a synopsis is in order. At the center of the plot is Orsino, Duke of Illyria. He is in love with a noblewoman living nearby, Olivia, but she refuses his suit as she is in a protracted period of mourning for her recently-deceased brother. Into Orsino's court comes Viola, a young heiress who has been shipwrecked and whose twin brother, Sebastian, she believes has been drowned. To protect herself from unwanted attention, she disguises herself as a boy called Cesario and becomes a page to Orsino. Orsino sends Cesario/Viola to woo Olivia for him and, sure enough, Olivia falls in love with him, I mean her. Meanwhile Cesario (that is, Viola), has fallen in love with Orsino.

While all this is going on, Olivia's poorer cousin, Sir Toby Belch has moved into her house and, like a typical Lord of Misrule, is partying hard with his pal, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, with the assistance of Olivia's lady-in-waiting, Maria. Olivia's steward, Malvolio, is a puritanical sort of fellow and is outraged by the antics of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Olivia's court fool, Feste. After Malvolio ruins their fun once too often, the partiers plan revenge. Knowing that Malvolio has high aspirations and that he is secretly in love with Lady Olivia, they plant a letter for him to find which looks like it came from Olivia but was actually written by Maria. The letter anonymously declares love for Malvolio and instructs him to act in a very peculiar manner to let the writer know he has read it. Malvolio follows the instructions and Olivia thinks he has gone mad. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria delightedly take the opportunity to imprison Malvolio in a dark shed to begin his "cure."

Meanwhile, Sebastian, Viola's twin brother who has not drowned after all, arrives in town. Olivia, who has been throwing herself at Viola-whom-she-thinks-is-Cesario, runs into Sebastian and mistakes him for Cesario. Well of course she does, this is Shakespeare. Olivia begs Sebastian to marry her. Sebastian's not sure how he got so lucky as to have a beautiful, rich heiress propose to him, but he agrees. There is a swarm of scenes of confused identity, a little sword-play, and then the dénouement, in which Viola and Sebastian are reunited, Orsino discovers that his new best friend Cesario is really his new best girl Viola and asks her to marry him, we hear that Sir Toby has rewarded Maria for her help by marrying her and everybody lives happily ever after. Well, everybody that is except Malvolio. Upon being released from his makeshift prison and invited to join the party, he swears revenge on all of them. Well, what did you expect from a character whose name means "Ill will?"

Now, back to the Epiphany themes in the play. There is, of course, the theme of appearance and revelation. Just as God "disguised" God's glory as a tiny baby, Viola disguises herself as Cesario, Maria disguises her letter as Olivia's, and Malvolio disguises himself as a bon-vivant. There are other disguises I did not mention in my quick synopsis but all are revealed in joy at the

end of the play, just as the baby Jesus was revealed as Christ to the Gentiles in the visit of the Magi, as the Son of God to the Jews at his baptism, and as a miracle worker at Cana. This sense of joy and wonder which is so pervasive in the play was at the very core of the traditional celebration of Epiphany. There was also a strong theme in the Old English Epiphany, as I mentioned earlier, of truce and reconciliation. In Twelfth Night, a number of duels are fought or proposed as the confusion among the characters leads to anger. At the end, almost all are reconciled – Orsino happily becomes Olivia’s brother-in-law rather than her suitor and Viola’s husband instead of Cesario’s rival, and so on. Malvolio is the exception but Shakespeare was an honest playwright who knew full well that there are no completely happy endings in this life. As with the revelation of Christ at his baptism, the action is precipitated by Viola and Sebastian coming up from the water, just as the Magi come to Bethlehem from the East, the siblings come to Illyria from another land, and just as with Christ’s first miracle, the happy action is crowned by marriage and feasting. There are other Epiphany connections in the play but I invite you to read it or watch the excellent 1996 film version to discover them yourself.

That was the middle. Now back to the beginning – the Scriptures, where all our explorations of the Faith begin. Where did some of these Epiphany themes arise that informed both centuries of Church celebration and this delightful play by England’s greatest writer? The most obvious answer is that they came from the stories of Jesus’ life that I’ve already mentioned – the visit of the Wise Men, his baptism, his first miracle. But you may remember that Matthew, who tells the first two of these stories, uses his telling of the Good News to point to how the life of Jesus incarnates the promises of God through the prophets. At the visit of the Magi, Jesus is revealed as Christ to the Gentiles; the light of God shines forth, *επισημασ*, to the world. It is just as Isaiah had written, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” Nations have come from afar to the Light of Israel, which shines out in the darkness of night. Just as the coming of the light would be celebrated on Twelfth Night, just as inbreaking joy would be celebrated in Shakespeare’s play, so Matthew and Isaiah rejoice in the glory of God being revealed to humankind. In writing on Isaiah 60:1, Bruce Epperly of Lancaster Theological Seminary notes, “‘praise’ and ‘glory’ need to be reclaimed by Christians insofar as they awaken us to the wondrous nature of life and the divine energy and wisdom flowing through all things.” Epperly points out that “Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of ‘radical amazement’ as a primary religious virtue.” Isaiah calls us to see the inbreaking work of God and to be amazed.

In telling the story of the three Eastern visitors, Matthew is clearly remembering that Isaiah spoke of the camels bringing pilgrims to Israel from faraway lands, visitors bringing gifts of gold and frankincense, proclaiming the praise of the Lord. But the story from Matthew that was first associated with Epiphany, the baptism of Jesus, has an Isaiah 60 connection, too. Isaiah prophesies that the wealth of the seas will come to Israel and Matthew may have had this in mind as well as he wrote of Jesus coming up out of the waters with the glory of the Holy Spirit upon him.

Just as the Epiphany theme of a joyous revelation of the mystery of God is foretold by Isaiah, so it is reflected in the years after Christ by the Apostle Paul. Writing to the church in Ephesus, he says, “the mystery was made known to me by revelation... In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Now, through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God’s light of glory

is shining on us all. Better still, “all” doesn’t just mean the Children of Israel. Paul continues, following Isaiah, “this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of 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.”

That was the beginning, in the Scriptures as is our tradition and my custom in speaking to you. You’ve heard the middle, how these Scriptures and the ideas in them influenced both Church and popular culture for centuries. Now, the end: What does all this mean to us, today? Well, in small part, I hope we understand our Christian heritage a little better and I hope I’ve given you a new appreciation for a significant piece of theatrical literature. But that’s not my real purpose this morning, nor I imagine what brought you here. No, the real through line of Epiphany is to understand what our place is in the ongoing revelation of God to humankind. Isaiah said, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” Matthew remembers Jesus saying, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father, who is in heaven.” Paul wrote, “through the Church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.” My brothers and sisters, in our relationship with our Loving Creator, our Mother and our Father, made possible through the grace of Christ Jesus and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, we have experienced the glorious light of God, reconciliation and healing, a joyous foretaste of the Wedding Banquet that awaits us and has already begun in our hearts. We will remember and look forward to that feast in a moment as we come to the Lord’s table. But afterwards, when we go out, let us shine with God’s light that abides in us. Let us proclaim liberty for captives and good news for the poor, comfort for those who mourn. When we go out, let us go with the joy of Epiphany, to bring the world the love of Jesus that makes us all one.