

send this

bookmark

print

close

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.38 No.7

The First Sunday in the Octave of Epiphany

01/14/07

EPIPHANY I An Epiphany sermon preached by William Ralston in 2001.

"We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

[Zechariah 8:23]

I.

The basic thought of Epiphany is very simple. It is the showing forth of Christ to all the people and nations of the earth.

Christ is the light of God, shining in the darkness all around us; in whose light we are enlightened, by whom the straight path is marked out for us, so that we may not go astray.

In our adherences to the Lord as our light and our salvation we fulfill the imagination and the vision of the prophet Zechariah, who sees the peoples of the earth responding to the people of the Covenant: "We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

Jesus is precisely that: "God-with-us." We are bidden to show this truth to all the world. It is the priceless gift God has entrusted to his Church. It is a gift which demands to be shared.

Christ has illuminated human life for us. He has shown the world in which each of us must live out his life in its true colors. He shows the world itself for what it really is; for he is the Son of Man, the basic human reality of our world. He is definitive.

And so we say we live in him, dwell in him. We exist, morally and spiritually, in the light of Christ; just as we exist physically and naturally, in the light of the sun.

And we pray that as our eyes grow more and more accustomed to the light of Christ, so we will come more and more to see with his eyes, and learn to look upon our world with a vision like his, unimpaired and true.

II.

But if Christ is the light that shines upon us and all about us, in whose light we see light, he is also the light that shines within us. He manifests himself, as old Dr. DuBose used to say, up at Sewanee, not

ever just to us and for us, but always also within us and through us. English has a word for this: "irradiate".

It is in the dark places of our minds and souls, the places of our dismal imaginations and disordered spirits that Christ must shine. We can be sure he sees every hidden crime and every desperate desire; but these shadows retreat from the light Christ can shed within our hearts and minds.

No matter how many bells we ring or songs we sing in honor of Christ the light of the world, it is all in vain unless his light is born in us. "Be born in us today."

This interior irradiation is what we call grace, the product of the union between mercy and charity. Whatever of good there is in us for others to see and cherish, whatever of us shows Christ forth in our lives, whatever makes other people think of him when they see us—this also is Epiphany.

Christ is the inner light of one's own self. And that is a strange and disturbing thought. Our words, our hands, our wills, our acts: these are the signs of Christ's presence in the world. He shines in the world through the hearts and minds of his faithful people. He trusts himself to us. It is an astonishing act of faith in us from our Lord himself.

III.

But there is something more. The Biblical understanding of illumination proceeds another step. It is through our eyes that Christ in one sense sees his world. As Son of God he sees it with perfect clarity, to its very depths., as the sun in its strength. As Son of Man, closer to us than we are to ourselves, he sees the world with us, and through our eyes.

Suppose I am a cracked mirror or a dirty glass? Or suppose I simply choose to draw a curtain and keep myself in the dark. Without any doubt I do these things and am any and all of these things.

In the most wholly destructive of his tragedies Shakespeare shows us Othello, entering his bed chamber. His innocent wife is asleep, shrouded in one of her wedding sheets. A candle is burning in the room before an icon of the Virgin Mary, where she has just finished her prayers. Othello goes to it to snuff it. He looks at it and says, "Put out the light." And he looks at his wife, whom he has been brought to believe unchaste and false and says: "And then put out the light"—the light of her life.

"Put out the light, and then put out the light." This is the very abyss of the human soul, wrapped in the toils of its own self-righteousness and mistaken justice, bent on darkness and murder.

Nothing else in literature so chills the very soul. It is the final chaos and obscurity of hell itself. "Put out the light, and then put out the light." And he does.

We see a human being bent on death, in process of extinguishing the light which is his own soul.

IV.

And yet, in spite of us and almost without our knowing, Christ shines upon and illuminates human life, not only as himself but also through us, his faithful and faithless children.

The prayer of every Christian in Epiphany is for the fulfillment in every place and every time of the prophecy of Zechariah. It is the prayer that the world may look at us, and instead of us, see Christ, and say: "We will go with you, for we [see] that God is with you."

And once again therefore I recall for you that definition which is for me the final determination of all of us who claim Christ as our Lord and our Light:

"A Christian is simply the kind of person who makes it easier for other persons to believe in God."

"We will go with you, for we [see] that God is with you."

The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.