

### *Epiphany 13-01-08*

*“that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs”* (Ephesians 3.6).

Epiphany may seem a minor feast after Christmas, but this is not the case. “He came unto his own” and it might have been the case that his coming was only for them. But it is not so; the coming is for all of humanity, and that is what we celebrate, for we are Gentiles, who, it might be thought, have no right to benefit from a Jewish event.

The New Testament is an intriguing collection of documents because all of its contents come from the time when the Good News for the Gentiles was still controversial. All the writers know they have to prove the case, and they do so in various ways. We should not take our inclusion for granted!

The first way is to demonstrate the eternal purpose of God, his “economy” as the early Fathers called it. This might be thought of as the work of the Father. There is an argument that some knowledge of God is given to all men as an aspect of creation (Romans 1). There is evidence that God's purposes under the Old Covenant involved non-Jews. Matthew implies (by the Star) the revelation to Balaam; his genealogy of the Saviour includes non-Jews such as Ruth and Uriah's wife. The later chapters of Isaiah offer hope that God's purposes will include the Gentiles; various New Testament writers pick up this truth.

The second way is to trace the words and actions of Jesus in his earthly life. Sometimes the sayings go back to the first point. Israel is not responding, but there is precedent for a Gentile response. Jesus mentions the Queen of Sheba, and the people of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah (Matthew 12.41-2).

Another form of this is Jesus' actions. He does not confine himself to Jewish territory. He does have dealings with Samaritans (Luke and John). He does heal the daughter of a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7.25-30) and the servant of a centurion (Matthew 8.5-13). These are to be assumed to be Gentiles. Some people who would like to reduce primitive Christianity to a failed Jewish sect allege that the Evangelists made up these words and actions; I think the dialogues in all of these cases have the ring of authenticity.

The third way, mainly in Luke, is to make the Gentile mission an explicit prompting of the Holy Spirit newly poured out on the church. This may be part of the meaning of Pentecost; it is certainly implied in the stories of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.26-39) and Cornelius (Acts 10). Paul in the Epistle reading does not claim to have originated the Gentile mission – merely that the Spirit had given him the proof that it was valid at a time when this was still needed.

Loosely, then, we might think of Father, Son and Spirit all active in different stages, but this is bad theology. God is one, and his activity towards his human creation is one. That may still leave Christianity looking somewhat odd. Why begin with the particular (Judaism) if the purpose was always universal? Yes, many people have tried to invent a universal faith (or to pretend that all religions are the same). But these are man-made inventions (and hardly impressive). The evidence we have (Jewish and Christian) is that God has worked in his own way, not the way we might have devised for him.

God has worked in his own way, and so the good news has reached us, for which we give thanks. But that is not the end of the matter. God, Father, Son and Spirit, worked in the Church to bring the good news to us. We are now that Church, and our mission is the same, to bring that good news to others. This is not a task confined to the clergy, or some elite group; it belongs to all Christians together (and sometimes individually). I do not mean that we are all called to pester everybody we meet with a pre-packaged gospel announcement. I think that generally achieves little and often does harm. But if the question of faith naturally arises we must try to explain (unless there is some compelling reason against such as a conflict with the obligations of work or public office).

That said, Christianity is not essentially an idea planted in an individual but a shared life in the Church. St. Paul (and for that matter John Wesley) was very careful to create fully functioning congregations, not just to preach individual salvation. To bring somebody to Christ will in practice

mean involving him or her in our common life. It is difficult when we have so little time together, of course. We might even be right to steer potential converts in another direction. But we must always remain open to the possibility that God will demand of us that we do speak to somebody. Epiphany is for everyone.

*The readings are for Epiphany itself: Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12.*