

Epiphany 1

“after the custom of the feast” (Gospel)

We know very little about Christ's infancy, so we have to try to extract what we can from what little we are given. The starting point is the theology of the Church as expressed in the creeds and in the books which it accepted as canonical. Very clearly, Jesus is a Jew. That is at the very least that he has a Jewish mother (in later rabbinic thought a Jewish mother makes a Jew; we do not know when this assumption came in, for, as Matthew was well aware, Ruth is not Jewish yet her children by Boaz are). The Old Covenant, or rather the series of covenants imposed by God and recorded in the books of the Old Testament, is his inheritance. But of course the birth is strange and the New Covenant is not confined to one people but open to all. So the simplest summary is probably that of Pope Leo: “totus in suis, totus in nostris” (Christ was completely at home in his own place, that is with his Father, and at the same time completely at home with us in our earthly life).

Jesus a Jew, then. But what does that mean? It is easy enough to ask the help of orthodox Jews (not liberals, and probably not hyper-orthodox either) as to what Judaism became after the destruction of Jerusalem. They may fairly add that surely some features of that Judaism must have existed before then. But existence is one thing, prevalence is another. It would help if we understood more about the holy family. Was it Galilean? How strong were the connections with Judea? This might make quite a difference. In Galilee, Judaism is a frontier faith and practised as it can be, so there are weekly worship meetings (synagogues are meetings before they are buildings). In Judea, one might be able to keep far more of the Law – which does not require such meetings though it does require several visits to the Temple during the year. Is the family in semi-exile in Galilee (as Matthew suggests)? John indeed plays up the irony. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” But the Galileans do receive him – therefore they are not in some sense “his own”.

But there is a solid fact. “Three times a year shall all your males present themselves before the Lord” and this is an obligation which could (though not easily) be discharged by Jews living in Galilee. We are told today of an instance when that obligation was discharged. So the holy family was observant. And the gospel gives us details, which amount to a “manifestation of Christ”. Not to the Gentiles, but to learned Jews. Jesus needs to learn from his own people, and in the very process of that learning reveals something of himself. And even a manifestation to his own family - “my father's business” is obviously not carpentry, for they do not teach that in the temple!

We are wrong to imagine that the temple was a place where “official” teachers were on hand to provide instruction. I do not think the Sadducees behaved like that; the Pharisees were unofficial; the scribes are anybody clearly learned, and might follow any of the several tendencies in Judaism. I expect that there might be various ideas expounded, and little restriction on this. It might have been almost as varied as the philosophical schools in Athens. Jesus would have to sift, to question.

So, a very limited manifestation. But it is a way into the difficult question whether Jesus thought he had a ministry to Gentiles. Observant Jews, it seems, minimised contacts with everybody else because the avoidance of ritual pollution was usually a duty. The story of Israel is often against Gentiles. The prophecy given to Balaam (himself a Gentile) may hint at the coming Anointed One but soon turns to cursing of the nations. The prophets all contain large sections of such cursing or denouncing of woes to come (which the Church of England has tended to hide from its clergy by not selecting these passages for reading). Jesus could have learnt that negativity. Galilee was an area where one would either avoid Gentiles or live alongside them – there was no middle course. But what we find is that he recalls a very different selection of prophecies, those which include the nations in God's generosity. Accordingly he heals Gentiles, albeit rarely. (Was the Gadarene demoniac a Jew? We don't know, but the context of the healing where unclean animals are kept for food is certainly Gentile.) And he gives little weight to the whole system of pollution.

So there is a basis for saying that the earthly ministry of Jesus includes some manifestation to Gentiles, and that the early Church was right to build on this. He did not invent this; God had already disclosed the intention in the Old Covenant, for those who would see it.

The sermon relates to the Gospel