

Sermon Notes for Epiphany

“did’st manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles” (Collect)

Bishop Wordsworth in his hymn “Songs of thankfulness and praise” follows the Prayer Book to make “manifest” (and derivatives) the routine translation of Epiphany. But words are always dangerous. After all, a political “manifesto” is likely to be an exercise in concealment, not disclosure! And, as the Jews of Jesus' time still remembered, the pagan king Antiochus who provoked the revolt of the Maccabees called himself a manifest god – to which the reply was to change one letter so that the title became “madman” (which the course of his life proved to be accurate). So if what is manifest ought to be blindingly obvious, by no means all such claims are true. “Men were deceivers ever”. But here God is the one claimed to be showing his hand, and God is no man that he should deceive. Some people think that God ought to be constantly doing this in a very visible way, but that is not God's way with man. The history of Israel is not marked by a series of spectacular interventions. It is true to say that Exodus (including Sinai) is a manifestation – God discloses who He is and what He wants. And God then almost is – and yet it is also true is not – with man (at least in Rabbinic commentary). But after that, God's providence is slowly discerned behind what seem to be (indeed at one level are) accidents of history.

The Old Covenant is a preparation, which is why the Church cannot (and Anglicanism did not) reject the books which are the memorial of that preparation and discernment. But preparation is for something. Throughout Advent, and up to the Epiphany, the readings for Morning and Evening Prayer have been from Isaiah – the book of Emmanuel, God with us. A book of hope and of promise as well as of record. God does disclose his purpose for man.

The Incarnation is the second manifestation of God to man, then. But not with the same ambiguity as the first. This time God is unambiguously with man. We rightly sing of “God in Man made manifest”. For Epiphany is not a collection of afterthoughts (the magi, the baptism, Cana) to tidy up after the major feast so much as Christmass itself seen through a different focus.

John Austin Baker explored the logic of the Incarnation by imagining God saying: “If men are to be free to find their true fulfilment, they must know the truth about their eternal situation. This truth can only be given to them in a personal existence, a human being who will be morally comprehensible to them. But this life will involve the most terrible suffering. *I will therefore send someone else to do the job.*” Of course not; if God behaved like that, we would not worship him, but rather defy him. He must do it Himself, or be false to Himself and unworthy of our response. “The affirmation of Christianity”, Baker therefore wrote, is “the once for all, historical embodiment of the personal God in a particular human individual”. (The Foolishness of God, pages 308-9)

Baker was not trying to invent a heretical Christology, but to expound orthodox Christology in modern terms. Take away the long words (which are the besetting sin of theology), and you have again “God in Man made manifest”. If God is to bridge the gap and make us one with Himself, then He must come perfectly Himself, but also perfectly one of us – and yet without being divided into two loosely related entities.

If that is the main point, Epiphany does incidentally show up true and false kings. I suspect Matthew drew Herod with a thought for that other child-murderer (of babies circumcised contrary to his decree), Antiochus. We sneer at the natural miracles associated with the dynasty of madmen and murderers in North Korea, and we do well. For the sin of pride is the fall of both men and angels (and the more so potentially of rulers for “he hath put down the mighty from their seat” is no little part of Christmass truth). Christ is King. Priest and Prophet, and the worship of the magi is appropriate – yet he will not in life demand worship even if it is his due. And Epiphany also incidentally shows true and false scholarship. The scribes know the answer, and do nothing. The magi know far less, and yet get the point. The Incarnation is not proven by natural miracles, nor by visions of angels, nor by the star in the East. These are at best congruent. Yet once the truth of the faith is established, there is room for such delights.

“God in Man made manifest”. And if so, in us. And if so, through us to others. Not by argument but by life. And if not, why not?