EPIPHANY

A Glimpse into Eternity

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THE LITURGY IN ITS ENTIRETY may be interpreted in terms of the mystery of Epiphany. There are two great parts or cycles of the liturgical year: the Epiphany season, which includes Advent and Christmas; and the Easter season, which is preceded by Lent and which includes pentecost. Extra Sundays that come in between these two great cycles or after pentecost are called Sundays in Ordinary Time in Roman Catholic liturgical books. The liturgical season of Epiphany embraces the sequence of Advent—Christmas—Epiphany. Easter embraces the themes of Lent—the paschal mystery—Easter—pentecost. But from a widened perspective the entire liturgical year proclaims and manifests both the mystery of Epiphany and the paschal mystery.

The liturgy proclaims the gospel in a context that is sacramental and that recalls the great events of salvation history. Salvation history is a series of dramatic and revelatory events in which God and human beings interact. These events are also epiphanies. As recorded, they are meant to be meditated on in prayer, preached about in homilies, and taught in Christian schools. The liturgy is a spool from which the one eternal divine mystery unravels into time and reveals itself as the many mysteries of faith. Moreover the word *epiphany* can additionally designate anyone's enlightening and revelatory experience, in that it may also entail deep insight into the self. Thus we distinguish between the Epiphany as an all-encompassing mystery of faith, and the various mysteries or epiphanies that populate and punctuate our ever-deepening religious experience.

The Epiphany as a liturgical season is spread over several events, which include the coming of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus and the wedding feast at Cana. But Jesus' reading of the book of Isaiah in the synagogue at the outset of his public ministry is also an epiphany, a

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revealing manifestation of his identity to the people and to himself. Each of Jesus' miracles is an epiphany; his five great sermons in St Matthew's gospel are epiphanies. (As there are five books in the Pentateuch, so there are five divisions to the book of Psalms, and there are five great sermons or teaching events in Matthew's Gospel.) The ultimate event of epiphany is the resurrection of Jesus, as it is the decisive revelation to the world about who Jesus is. The mystery of Epiphany shines through and gives meaning to the paschal mystery. The life, mission, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus all serve to manifest his identity as Emmanuel and his work as divine revealer and saviour. The pentecost scene in the Acts of the Apostles is an epiphany. And the journeys of St Paul, like our own lives and actions, continue to manifest and proclaim the reality of God in Christ and in the Church. The mystery of the Church is the mystery of Epiphany as well, as it is the continuing revelation of God's glory despite the sins and failures of history. The Bible is an epiphany in writing that tells of many epiphanic events; it is a collection of epiphanies. In the Bible, what is shown in glory is spoken in story.

Epiphany and Me

The reality of Epiphany addresses me in my busy, active, assertive life of teaching and research. It teaches me that the world and its people are underpinned by the divine plan and dispensation. God is perfectly competent to carry on and carry out the history-long process of self-manifestation in the universe and in time without my help and without any human effort. I ought to pause prayerfully over this truth before I realise again that, in the plan of God, I am also called to cooperate freely in God's project. The busy, active and assertive self I am needs to acknowledge quietly that the greater initiative always belongs to God. I am ever humbled at the prospect that my own picayune plans, even when not evil in effect or intent, may interfere with God's ways and plans. Even so, God places me in situations where I can make a difference in the accomplishment of God's plan. Each day there may be two or three, or even five or six, opportunities for this.

On the occasion of the miracle at Cana Jesus complained to Mary, when she asked him for help, that 'My hour has not yet come' (John 2:4). What does his 'hour' mean? It means the special time

The Wedding Feast at Cana, ***by Giusto de' Menabuoi***

when, in the divine plan, God will manifest God's glory. At Cana it was not yet time for Jesus to work the first of his signs or miracles. Yet, he heeded his mother's request, thus seeming to alter his Father's plan a bit, and showing us that our prayers of supplication make a difference. Given the specific changes and decisions each of us makes in the course of life, God adjusts the working out of God's plan. Our very freedom and free responses are important to God. Our trusting requests made to God in prayer alter the ways in which God carries out the plan. Our freedom and our initiative are interwoven with God's self-manifesting glory.

The deaths of each of us, like the other events in our lives, are epiphanies that manifest God's plan, show God's glory and realise God's Kingdom. Death is a moment of triumph, in which God's glory is shown and God's Kingdom takes a significant, even irreversible, step forward. Success and progress, perhaps just a little, maybe more, are permanently fixed. When we die, points for glory go up on the cosmic scoreboard. The forces of evil and negativity suffer a defeat. Each death, humanly suffered by our loved ones as a moment of loss is, for

the one who dies, a celebration. Epiphany means that you and I do not die alone. In the hour of our deaths, great glory is manifested and enjoyed. We see God's plan for the first time.

Epiphany and the Church

I think of epiphany past, epiphany present and epiphany future. Epiphany past includes liturgical and scriptural memories of the three kings, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and Jesus' first miracle at Cana. These three events of the past contain rich meanings as different dimensions of the mystery of Epiphany. Our own missions as members of the Church in our own time and place constitute the epiphany as present. And the Church has a future, as the continuing manifestation of God's presence as Emmanuel in the world. God is with us, and the Church needs to proclaim this gospel and show it as ministering presence.

Membership in the community of Christians, in the Church, is a big part of the mystery of the Epiphany. The Epiphany is God's manifestation of God's plan and God's glory in time and history. The Church is the Body of Christ, the Communion of Saints, the People of God. It is the abiding presence of Jesus in the world, as the reality and meaning of Easter is poured out upon all humankind and upon all creation at pentecost. We have a corporate identity as members of the Church and thus our witness must be corporate as well as individual. We announce the realities of prayer, sacrament and gospel to the world through our presence and service to others.

The Church is the institution designed by God to dispense grace and knowledge of the mysteries of God throughout history. God allows this Church, quite mysteriously, to be finite, fallible and sinful. This is part of the mystery of the Church. The frailty of the Church helps show that God is incarnate, that God takes on all of our humanity, and that God works continuously among us to strengthen our frailty and to heal our sinfulness. God is not only present in the Church Triumphant. God is also present in the Church Militant, which is still striving here on earth, and in the Church Suffering, which is being purified and prepared for entering ultimately into glory.

The transformation that was begun on the cross continues. Really, all of history is a long process of the transformation of created reality into Christ and into Church. The cross and Easter are the most

explicit moments that enact and reveal this transformation and our involvement in it. Easter and pentecost both happen on Sundays. And every Sunday Mass is really and radically a celebration of both Easter—the resurrection of Jesus—and the birth of the Church, which continues to bring the reality of the resurrection into the world through its sacraments and activities.

Epiphany, Witness and the Water of Life

Jesus is the supreme martyr or witness, giving his life to show the inner glory of God and to share it with all humankind. But we do not have to die the way Jesus did in order to become martyrs. We are all martyrs in so far as we are all witnesses. Martyrdom is a very outward-looking phenomenon. It is a witness to others, a manifestation of inner values in an outward way. What we die for, and death itself, are an outward sign of inner meaning and intention.

Our baptism makes us martyrs. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and so John is the hero and patron of Lent in a special way: John's martyrdom by Herod was a sign of the coming martyrdom of Jesus. In baptism, mysteriously, we die with Jesus and we rise with him again, now publicly and professedly, as martyrs and co-workers for the Kingdom of God. We go down into the water, as if to drown and to die, and we rise again full of new life, the Holy Spirit and Easter graces.

Baptism, *from* The Seven Sacraments, *by Rogier van der Weyden*

Baptism means washing or cleansing, and water is another theme that fits into the theology of Epiphany—which includes the baptism of Jesus—as well as the theology of Easter. At the Easter Vigil celebration we read about the creation of the world, in which God

separates the water from the dry land (Genesis 1:6–7), and also about how God saved humanity and all the animals from the great flood in the time of Noah (Genesis 6–8). Water epitomizes both the power of nature and the power of grace.

Then and now, water is a destructive force. There is no life without water—our bodies are made up of water, up to 98 per cent—yet water threatens us with death and destruction through floods, tsunamis, mudslides or slipping suddenly in the bathtub. At the same time Christians are baptized, cleansed, purified and made into children of God, by the pouring of, or immersion in—water.

The natural element out of which life and sustenance come is water. Ancient peoples organized their lives around it. The Egyptians had the Nile, to them a divine river that inundated and irrigated the land on its banks annually for one mile outward on each side. The Mesopotamians lived either near the Persian Gulf or between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The way in which fresh water from the rivers mixed with the salt water of the Gulf was a great mystery to them. The Greek philosopher Thales speculated that all forms of matter were different forms of water—liquid, ice or vapour.

Just as in the Old Testament Yahweh was the Lord of nature, who had power over the waters, in the New Testament Jesus arrives in the as the one who can walk on water—and who empowers Peter, symbolizing the Church, to walk on the waters towards him (Matthew 14:22–33). The fact that Jesus chose his first disciples from among the fishermen of Galilee is not to be disregarded. During Lent we remember Jesus as he accepted water to drink from the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:5–30). This well is of tremendous importance in Bible history. It was here that the patriarch Jacob, grandfather of the twelve tribes, first met the lovely Rachel, who became mother to the twelve brothers who were the fathers of the tribes (Genesis 29:10). And it is here that Jesus identifies himself as offering living water that refreshes those who ask for it to the point of eternal life. Elsewhere Jesus says that if we give as much as a glass of water in God's name we will not lose our eternal reward (Mark 9:41). In the story of Lazarus and Dives, Dives yearns to have Lazarus dip his finger in water and place it on his tongue (Luke 16:24). The washing of feet also plays an important part in the New Testament.

I recently listened to a homily about the wedding at Cana. Sometimes we think too quickly about the miracle involved, and fail to pause here too over the elemental significance of water. The homilist said that the large jars full of water at the wedding feast were there for the ceremonial washing that was part of formal dining for the Jews. The theme of water connects the baptism in the Jordan with the miracle at Cana—both of which are part of the threefold Epiphany feast. The event connects baptism, symbolized by the water, and the Eucharist, symbolized by the wine. We also remember that blood and water flowed out from the side of Christ when he was pierced by a lance on the cross (John 19:34).

Epiphany and the Liturgy

There is a scene in the gospel of Luke in which Jesus experiences a personal epiphany. It happens in a liturgical setting, in a synagogue, near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus reads publicly from the book of Isaiah (Luke 4:16–24). We remember that Luke is the evangelist who seems particularly to love history, and who presents the life of Jesus as the centre of salvation history. So, here is a scene of epiphany in which eternity breaks into time and history in the life of Jesus. As Jesus reads about a coming saviour in the book of Isaiah, the realisation crashes in upon him, and probably upon some of his listeners too, that he is that saviour. Jesus announces that on this day this scripture is fulfilled as they listen to it being read. Some of the listeners are incensed at his audacious claim,

Christ Preaches in the Synagogue, ***by Maurycy Gottlieb***

and seek to kill him. His passion has begun! The fulfilment of that scriptural passage, and indeed of all the scriptures, happens right there. It must have been as powerful an experience for Jesus as was his baptism in the Jordan.

We are given the liturgy so that we can experience epiphanies too. Liturgy is the dispensation and dispersal in worship of God's holy mysteries through time. Liturgy is the work of the Church that arranges the Sundays and seasons so as to present the scriptures and guide itself through the many aspects of the one divine mystery. Divine revelation is thus made available to be learnt and reinforced in the community. In the divine office, as part of the liturgy, the entire Psalter is recited each week. The Eucharist is the centre of the liturgy and of every Christian life. We worship together and we pray as individuals. Through all this process, in which we plug our individual lives into the great, cyclical and flowing life of the Church, we catch glimpses of eternity. In very intimate moments, we come to know the God who seeks to know us well and to love us with grace.

The liturgical season of Epiphany is the broad sweep of events from Advent, through Christmas, to the arrival of the Magi, the baptism of the Lord, and the first miracle at Cana. We think of God's manifesting of Godself to the three kings as part of the celebration of Christmas. Jesus is God Emmanuel, God with us. God becomes incarnate in the world as Jesus. At Christmas, God shows that his plan of becoming flesh in our flesh and of sharing human life with us has been in the works since the first moment of creation. In the mystery of Epiphany, God sends the message of his glory, that is, the Good News of our salvation, to the entire universe. All matter is to be taken up; all happenings and all of history are now to be seen and contemplated under the aspect of God's glory and of God's actual coming into the world. The mysteries of the creation, the incarnation and the epiphany are really only one mystery. God shares this mystery with us in one supreme act of self-communication, revelation and historical presence in the birth of Jesus.

The creation, the incarnation, and the epiphany are really only one mystery

Really, the whole liturgy is Epiphany, showing, or manifesting God's glory and the availability of grace. But it is just as true to say that the whole liturgy, every aspect of it, is a manifestation of the paschal mystery, the mystery of our salvation, and the mystery of its

communication and proclamation to all the world. The reality of Epiphany opens out into the continuous celebration of the paschal mystery, beginning with Lent, through Holy Week and the Triduum, and several Sundays after Easter. Pentecost is an enormous feast of epiphany in which the Church is established as the source of all graces for everyone, with baptismal grace and the light of revelation to be poured out from it until the end of time. The gospel proclaims both the Epiphany and the paschal mystery, which is part of the ever-unfolding mystery of Epiphany. The several mysteries of faith are really parts of the single great mystery of God self-revealing in creation, time and history. In the liturgy all these mysteries merge and become one, as the mystery of Eucharist gathers and embraces all the realities collected and presented in the scripture, homily and oral prayers. The two halves of the liturgical year are essentially one.

Epiphany and Prayer

When Roman Catholics meditate on the mysteries of the rosary or on the stations of the cross, each scene depicts a mystery that contains a glimpse into eternity. The eternal mystery of God is unravelled and dispensed in time and history as a series of epiphanies which, while being particular events of manifestation, are such glimpses of eternity as well. Reality and experience are suffused and supercharged with the reality of God and the breaking in of God's Kingdom. Epiphany has to do with this breaking in and becoming visible of God's reality and God's Kingdom.

In prayer we have a privileged perception of the always here and ever-coming Kingdom, and the initiative of God in manifesting God's divinity, the already present Kingdom and eternal life. Prayer involves finding a window that looks into eternity: in the Eastern Churches, icons are called *windows on eternity.* We have to step into eternity to experience God's glory to its full extent. For now, we must be satisfied with catching glimpses of it. Prayer is an act and a habit of being attentive to these glimpses as they come, and also the taking of opportunities to ask God for favours and for guiding signs. The prayer of perceiving in contemplation evokes the prayer of response and discernment. In praying and in living, we glimpse the coming Kingdom, and we know that it is already here, but we also know it is largely invisible in this world. We may even suspect that, again

mysteriously, the Kingdom, as still invisible seed in the ground, is more effective for being quietly invisible. We live it and preach it, witness to it, making it ever less invisible. To catch a glimpse of the Kingdom is also to receive the mission to announce and spread it.

Epiphany and Eternity

The idea of eternity is important to the idea of epiphany. God's glory is eternal, but, through the mystery of the Epiphany, it is made present in time. Part of the reality of time, of being suspended moment by moment in the passing of time, is that we do not see eternity for the abiding and glorious reality that it is. For the most part, we cannot yet perceive God's glory in its all-at-once intensity. Glory and eternity are really the same thing. They are the dynamic, vivid and vivifying reality of God. The Being of God is glorious and eternal. Glory does not change, but it manifests itself in events that do change. Glory is eternal, but its manifestation is temporal and historical. In itself it is infinite, but it shows itself in glimpses that are spread over time. The doctrine of the Trinity represents the fullness of divine revelation. This doctrine takes us into the inner life of God. Glory is the outer manifestation of God's inner life and splendour, and holiness is the very inner life of God. Glory is holiness made manifest. The mystery of the Trinity reveals the inner holiness of God, and draws us into an experience of and participation in that holiness. Epiphany, or the manifestation of glory, is also theophany, or manifestation of God's inner reality of holiness. There is no greater mystery than the mystery of the Trinity, and it contains all the other mysteries of revelation.

The New Testament teaches the Church about the Trinity. The mystery of God and of divine love is so rich that Jesus is seen in the New Testament as the incarnation of the eternal God. The great councils of the early Church bring to light the implications of the biblical teaching about the Trinity. The all-loving Father is the one who sent Jesus as the Christ. The Spirit is poured out on all humankind. Little beyond this can be said to explain or expound the ultimate divine mystery, the ultimate revelation, the consummate clue as to what love is and to what the ground of our shared human experience is. Let God be God! Let the Trinity manifest itself in its own way. Let our understanding be suspended and superseded. Let the eternal mystery

of God be, in the unfolding process of our lives and prayers, an incomprehensible mystery!

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