

In these first weeks of the Epiphany season, we are reminded of the ways in which Christ manifests Himself to the world. Of course on the feast of Epiphany, we read about the wise men from the East who came and worshiped the new-born king. Our psalm this morning particularly touches upon this theme. In it, not only do we see the king and His blessings described, but we read this verse which reminds us of the Epiphany narrative, "15 He shall live, and unto him shall be given of the gold of Arabia; * prayer shall be made ever unto him, and daily shall he be praised."

So the themes of Kingship and kingdom are prominent themes during this season. In it is highlighted the fact that this tiny baby is the king of all of creation. We mentioned last week the theme of light that pervades this season. The divine light of God entered into our world as a young child. If you recall about a month and a half ago we discussed the imagery of the sun, moon, and stars. These heavenly bodies are symbolic of earthly kings and empires as mentioned in the very first chapter of Genesis. God placed the heavenly bodies in the sky to rule over the day and the night, and consistently in the prophets, and I would argue in the gospels, the darkening of these bodies is apocalyptic language for the collapse of earthly rulers. When the sun is darkened and the moon does not give its light, it means that the end of an earthly kingdom is at hand.

With the advent of Jesus Christ into the world, we see the opposite happening. Christ's star does not fall from the sky, but it is rather established in creation. A new king has come, and His light draws the wise men, who represent the rulers of the world acknowledging the new born king. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King. ... Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns. ... He rules the world with truth and grace." Let us note that this language of this familiar and favorite Christmas carol is set in the present tense. The King is come now and we have His joy now. We sing this every Christmas, but I am not confident that we believe it. This is not a future prophecy, it is a present reality, and the reality that

Christ reigns NOW is front and center during the Epiphany season.

Over the next weeks, we contemplate other ways in which Christ manifests Himself as the Divine Ruler during Epiphany. This week we read of the twelve year old Jesus holding discourse with the rulers and leaders of the synagogue. "And it came to pass, that after three days they (Mary and Joseph) found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers."

Next week we continue to read through these ancient Epiphany scenes. First we will revisit the baptism of Jesus by his cousin, John the Baptist, in the Jordan River, and the following week we will read about Christ's first miracle, the changing of the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. All of these events and miracles point to the singular distinctiveness of Jesus Christ. He, and only He, is the Messiah. He is our Lord and Savior, and He is King of all.

Now as the manifestation of Christ is rehearsed in these gospel lessons, the epistles take us through the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Those readings begin, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." What is the implication of these readings? Since Jesus Christ is King, we must bring Him gifts of worship just as the Kings of the East offered gifts and sacrifices unto the infant Christ. We too must do Him obeisance. What are the gifts we bring except we ourselves? The light of the Bethlehem star indicated that the new and final King was here, therefore we offer ourselves to the King as living and holy sacrifices, made acceptable by His own atoning and redeeming work.

The question then becomes, just how are we to do this? How do we present ourselves as living sacrifices to God? To answer this, let us first note that the language of sacrifice is the language of worship. Understand that Jesus has first given Himself as the sacrifice for us. He is the prototype for a living sacrifice for He died to Himself, and in the power of His divinity, has returned from the dead and now lives. This is the precondition for fallen humanity to return to God. In Christ, and only in Christ, are we able to die to ourselves and then live to God. Only in Jesus are our sacrifices of praise and worship are acceptable.

This then brings insight into today's collect which begins, "O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee." Now of course, everything we do is an act of worship, but may I suggest here this morning that what our collect has in mind is our corporate liturgical worship through which we ascend up to the very presence of Christ, where we then receive His sacrifice for us, and then where we offer ourselves up to Him. Those who call upon the Name of the Lord are those who worship Him. By His mercy and grace, by His merits, Christ receives our self-sacrifices and then transforms them, and then sends them out to "do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in." This is the divine dialog of the Holy Communion. This is the only offering which is acceptable to God: receiving the life of Christ through His sacrifice and then responding with the sacrifice of every last bit of us given to Him.

The collect then continues by pleading that, through our sacrificial worship, we may know what things we ought to do and then that we would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to go do them. This is the summary view of the Christian life. Step one is that we follow the example of the boy-Jesus in the temple. We must be about Our Heavenly Father's business. Our lives must be centered on our corporate worship of God. Step 2 is that in our worship we are instructed in how we are to live and empowered to go live that way. We go do what we know we ought to do.

Allow me to make a little digression here about the boy Christ's actions in the gospel.

Worship and the study of God must take priority in our lives. I would even suggest that this takes precedence before our families. This is hard for us to hear. We don't really get this. But not only in today's lesson do we see Jesus prioritizing worship, being in the presence of God in the temple, over family. You might recall these interactions from the gospels:

"Jesus, your brothers and mother are outside waiting for you ... you gotta go now."

"Who are my brothers and my sisters and my mother?" (and understand He is talking about the Blessed Virgin Mary here.) "They are these around Me who are listening to me. These who love and follow God. These who follow Me. These are my family."

Let us also not forget that Jesus said, "I come to bring division. To set Father against son and mother against daughter. I do not come to bring peace, but a sword".

Jesus is the most important thing in our lives, and our decisions about participating in worship must align with this profession. Your actions reveal your true convictions. Certainly there is always grace with God, but let our lives be characterized by a devotion to worshiping Him that supersedes our reliance upon His loving patience. Since He set this example in His own earthly life, for even at 12 He was about His Father's business, I am not sure how we are justified in not following it.

Let us now return to our epistle lesson. Romans chapter 12 also provides us with instruction regarding how we get along with each other in the family of God, in the Church. In the second half of this morning's epistle, St. Paul states, "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another." We see the

emphasis here on life within the body of Christ. We are all members of each other. We are Christ's Body, we are His Family.

Here, we must ask why we have this dual theme in these Epiphany readings? We see Christ manifested as the Messiah, the King of All Creation, in the gospel readings. Further this morning, we are encouraged to give ourselves fully, completely, to our king by diligently worshiping with our family, the Church. However, there is yet one more connection between these two themes. The Church, being the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, is the continuing revelation of Christ in the world. The gospels reveal Christ's incarnate existence, Christ in the flesh, and the Church reveals His continuing existence, His continuing presence in the world. We, as the local expression of the Body of Christ catholic, are an Epiphany to our community. We thus must needs have our act together, for a parish that is full of contentions and strife is not ruled by the love of God, but is rather ruled by the selfishness of its members. Such a parish brings disrepute to our Savior. God forbid that we would be characterized in such a negative way.

During this season we are given instructions for kingdom life because together we are the life of Christ in this world. We the Church are to be the star of Bethlehem, illuminating the darkness and drawing all men to come worship the King. How do we do this? We heed St. Paul admonition becoming living sacrifices. Let us therefore center our lives around the table of the Lord. Let our lives together be marked by love and humility towards each other and by a sensitivity to God's leading. And let the testimony of our conduct comport with the creeds we confess.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.