

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 23 January 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Epiphany – a revelation, a glimpse of the truth, a sight of the divine in the midst of the ordinary. An epiphany, as David told us last week, can be described as an ‘Aha!’ moment, a moment when we suddenly see things clearly.

Traditionally there are three moments which together sum up the Church’s understanding of Epiphany: the arrival of the Magi to worship the infant Christ, Jesus’ Baptism by John, and the wedding feast at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine. Taken together they reveal key things about God in Christ: that Christ came for all people everywhere, that Jesus Christ is indeed the Beloved of God, that Christ came to bring joy and fullness in the midst of our mortal life.

Epiphany in the Church’s use is not merely any flash of insight, it is a flash of truth, seeing reality as God sees it. Each epiphany is a gift, an opportunity to see God and to show God to others. This God who comes among us in Christ reveals himself uniquely to and in each individual. It seems very appropriate that the feasts of the Confession of Peter and the Conversion of Paul occur in the midst of this season – and yet more appropriate that the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity which unites them occurs during Epiphany.

In today’s Gospel, Matthew sums up Jesus’ preaching with the words, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Turn around, look, God’s reality is right here! Look and you will see God in the world.

That is what the season of Epiphany reminds us of: God is right here if we just stop, turn around, and let our eyes see. We are all in the darkness described by Isaiah and echoed by Matthew, the darkness into which God’s light shines.

The Confession of Peter and the Conversion of Paul are wonderful examples of that kind of Epiphany. Each of these men was already following, already engaged in God’s work in the world, but still they were in darkness.

After Jesus called Peter, which we heard about in two different narratives, one last week and another this week, Peter followed, but he regularly let his own misinterpretations, his own willfulness, get in the way of understanding and doing what Christ called him to. The feast of his confession celebrates the moment when Peter suddenly realized that the man he had been following was indeed the Christ of God and burst out with a proclamation of what he now clearly saw. “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!” Did that epiphany make him less willful or impetuous? Did it free him from temptation? Clearly not.

He still regularly made silly outbursts and then denied Jesus when he was arrested and refused to believe in the resurrection until he went to the tomb himself. Yet his epiphany was effective for him and in him. This revelation enabled him to keep turning around, to keep coming back to the truth, to overcome his natural

impetuosity. And it made Peter a great preacher who went on to share what he had experienced with thousands of people, helping them to see the Kingdom of heaven right there among them, helping them to turn around and become part of Christ's work in the world.

Similarly, Paul was a faithful and zealous servant of God. Unlike Peter the fisherman, he was well-educated, dedicated to religious observance, always putting the good of God's people ahead of self interest – but he had a terrible temper and was arrogantly certain of his own view of the world. His darkness was different from Peter's, but similarly led him to do wrong. He was so blinded by his own certainty that he had to be knocked flat and literally blinded to have his epiphany. He was so certain that Jesus and all who followed him were wrong, were lying about God, that he was ready to kill them to protect God and Israel from the lies. So Christ came to him with an overwhelming epiphany on the Damascus Road. Paul met the Risen Christ and recognized the Beloved of God. Paul's whole world changed, when he turned around and saw that God was in the one who was crucified, not in the people who killed him. This did change Paul forever, and set him on a path of preaching and teaching that brought the Gospel out into the wide world, planting the church all around the Roman empire. But Paul still had his temper to contend with, still tended to intolerance and rejection.

God was revealed to each of these fierce and powerful men. They turned around and saw God active right there in their world and in their lives. And ever after people have been able to see God active in Peter and Paul. Their epiphanies worked powerfully in them and for all of us who have come after.

For all of their faithfulness to Christ and all of their commitment to the Church of Christ, these two did not get along with one another. They had powerful disagreements about how the church was to incorporate nonJews. Their backgrounds were as different as they could be. There was no natural affinity to bind them together.

What they had in common was Christ – and in the end that was enough. The wise James was able to mediate between them and help them to find away toward unity.

I find it richly symbolic that Peter and Paul stand at opposite ends of the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. They are united. They are committed to the One Church. But they are a full week apart, just as they stand at opposite ends of an ikonostas. Together they represent the Church in Jerusalem, and all of the church that stems from her. Different backgrounds, different personalities, different perspectives – but one in their devotion to Christ.

In today's Epistle, Paul is challenging the Corinthian faithful to move beyond their petty partisanship, to understand the importance of unity. He scolds them for forming competing groups allied with particular leaders. The Church in Jerusalem can appear just like this. Jerusalem is where the church was born, so that all Christians look toward Jerusalem as a kind of spiritual home. So as the church grew throughout the world and divided into many competing and conflicting groups - orthodox, catholic, Anglican, evangelical, Pentecostal,

etc. - each of the separate branches wanted to have a presence at home, in Jerusalem – so that among that tiny Christian minority of the city one could find people saying “I am Syrian, I am Coptic, I am Anglican, I am Roman Catholic, I am Lutheran” and so on.

As the Jerusalem Christian authors of this year’s Christian Unity materials remind us, none of the divisions began in Jerusalem. They have come home to Jerusalem from the divided world. But in Jerusalem in recent years the divided groups have come together. It is truly inspiring to see how they have begun to study and pray together, to learn from one another, to serve the suffering together. The divided Christians in Jerusalem are beginning to live out the unity we all pray for.

In their tireless work of education and healing is a new epiphany, a revelation of God’s love at work in Christ’s Body. This is the unity we pray for, a unity which honors the richness of our differing traditions and histories, which accepts that God loves us all, that Christ died for us all. To be the Body of Christ, Christ’s hands and feet serving a broken world, we cannot be divided. We have no credibility to those outside if we spend our energy denigrating one another. The light comes, the epiphany happens when we are united in love and mutual respect.

It is wonderful to be inspired by the example of the beleaguered Christians of Jerusalem – but what of us? Just like Paul and Peter, we have epiphanies so that we can provide epiphanies for others.

Paul makes it clear that divisions and party spirit are not from God. In the Church there should be no choosing up sides. Paul came to bring people not to himself but to God. Similarly our hospitality cannot be about sheep-stealing or party spirit, but about sharing the gifts we have been given, making our windows clear so God can shine through.

How do we turn around to see God; how is God seen in and through us? The turning around can happen in times like this when we know we are praying together with Christians of all traditions throughout the world, our hearts and intentions united.

Then God will be seen in us. In how we treat one another. How we welcome people who come among us. How we serve people in need. How we speak to people and recognize them wherever we are. How we listen to them. What we say, what we do, what we are.

God will be seen in us when we live as if we fully know that God loves us completely and that God loves everyone we encounter completely.

Like Peter and Paul we are able to shine with the light of God’s love so that we each offer epiphanies wherever we are. It is our privilege and our calling.