

“Ephphatha, that is, Be opened”

On behalf of *The Prayer Book Society of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island*, let me thank the Parish of St. George’s for the great privilege and pleasure of being here this evening for this service of choral evensong and for the wonderful music provided by Garth McPhee and the choir. Boyd and Buxtehude, words of Sedulius and a tune named St. Venantius – it doesn’t get any better! Thank you.

Epiphany is the most theological of the seasons of the Church year. It is God in your face, as it were, and yet speaks profoundly about who we are, who we are in God’s sight. The whole focus and emphasis is upon what are sometimes known as the divine attributes, the attributes of God. Three of the essential attributes of God that are made known in the season of the Epiphany are “*the infinite wisdom, power and goodness*” of God, concisely named in the first of *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* as found in our Canadian Prayer Book. They are attributes that belong to the theological reflections of Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought. For Christians these are all made manifest through the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Epiphany is pre-eminently the season of teaching and therein lies the modern dilemma and challenge for our divided, confused, and despairing world. The Magi-Kings from Anatolia came to Bethlehem bearing gifts to the one to whom the star brought them. Unlike the Caesars of the world whose *veni, vidi, vici*, “*I came, I saw, I conquered*”, captures the dominance meme of the regimes of power, the Magi-Kings *viderant, venerunt, et adoraverunt*, “*they saw, they came and they adored*”; in short, they worshipped. The gifts they present are gifts which honour and teach, “*sacred gifts of mystic meaning*”. Epiphany is the pageant of mystical theology. We participate in what we behold. We are in the midst of great mysteries. Gold signifies that Christ is King; frankincense that he is God; and myrrh that he is sacrifice.

Such things are both revelation and redemption; the revelation of God and the redemption of humanity. But only through something taught and learned. That makes all the difference – then and now. “*They departed into their own land another way*”, having been warned in a dream, Matthew tells us, “*not to return to Herod*”. There is a sense of ominous danger that foreshadows the richly allusive but disturbing story of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents; the theme of myrrh and sacrifice, the theme of redemptive suffering. “*How vain the cruelty of Herod’s fear*”, as we sang. But they return, as T.S. Eliot famously intuits, “*no longer at ease*”, no longer comfortable and secure in their former assumptions and outlooks. The suggestion is that they are changed by what they have been given to see. Such is the purpose of Epiphany. It opens us out to the presence of God and to the purpose of God for our lives. The intent is to change how we see, how we think and feel about God and about the suffering realities of our humanity. But what kind of change?

It is not by accident that the Gospel for *The First Sunday after the Epiphany* is about the child Christ at the age of twelve being found 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". It is about teaching and learning. It is his bar mitzvah, we might say, signalling the transition from childhood to manhood humanly speaking. But it also signals the divine will and purpose of the Incarnation of Christ. It is an epiphany of the divine purpose of Christ's coming. "Wist ye not?" he says to Mary, "did you not know that I must be about my father's business?"

That Gospel is then followed on *The Second Sunday after the Epiphany* by the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana of Galilee where Jesus turned the water into wine. It is, as John tells us, the "*beginning of signs*" that Jesus did "*and manifested forth his glory*". It signals the meaning of all of the miracle stories of the Gospel, the principle, the *arché*, the *principium*, of all signs. Miracles, too, belong to the teaching, something which not everyone gets, like Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States who took his scissors to the New Testament and removed all reference to the miracles, leaving only the moral teachings of Christ but bereft of the wonder that belongs to the teaching of the Epiphany, its greater theological reasoning that presents us with the vision of the perfection of our humanity. Morality without metaphysics, I fear, is merely political correctness.

Epiphany means this teaching is for all people. That is the point of the double healing miracles of the Gospel for today, *The Third Sunday after the Epiphany*, a healing within Israel and without Israel, the healing of a leper, the healing of the Roman Centurion's servant, a healing by touch and word near at hand, a healing by a word from afar. Such are the properties of divinity. These are rich and important images about the divine will and purpose for our humanity through the things of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

The teaching is about God and about the truth of our humanity as found in our being with God. This is the teaching that belongs to the Church to proclaim. It complements and completes the ways in which philosophy can teach and help us to deal with a divided world such as the Canadian scholar and philosopher, Carlos Fraenkel, suggests in his interesting book "*Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World*". In my view, such forms of philosophical engagements with different communities of particular identities must occur in and through and not in spite of the specific texts which belong to the integrity of our spiritual traditions and communities. In other words, at issue is the philosophical theology of our spiritual communities made manifest in the Scriptures.

Such is the way in which the Epiphany stories engage our contemporary world. The task of the Church, it seems to me, is to recover a confidence in the traditions of reason belonging to the interpretation of Scripture that both counters and complements many of the confusions and insights of our world and day. Not, to be sure, from the presumption of being "*assured of certain certainties*" with which to scold and berate others - "*be not wise in your own conceits,*" as Paul reminds us - but as a way of thinking and reasoning, thoughtfully and carefully (no matter how certain we are in our opinions about certain elections and referenda!). It would mean to reclaim the teaching

and to enter more fully into the task of constantly learning. That would be the real change, a change in us and in our attitude and response to what is around us. That is the point and the work or mission of *The Prayer Book Society of Canada* really, the idea of doctrine in devotion means our engagement with our world and day. It means the teaching church.

The lessons of the Epiphany challenge us about the confusions and uncertainties of personal identity in contemporary culture. It counters the age-old temptation to domesticate divinity, to make God conformable to us, to turn from God to ourselves and thus to a kind of idolatry of ourselves. Isaiah points out clearly the problems with all forms of idolatry both in relation to God and ourselves. Jesus himself warns us about “*signs and wonders*”, without which he says “*you will not believe*”. He seeks to point us to what the signs signify and to their effective force in our lives – such is the meaning of the sacramental life of the Church.

It is about our being mindful of God’s will and purpose. “*Take, eat*”; “*Drink this*”; “*Do this in remembrance of me*”. What is a sacrament? “*An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*”. A powerful idea. God uses the things of the world, even the realities of our humanity, to draw us into communion with him in his utter otherness. The sacramental aspects of religion reflect the essential understanding of Christ as God and man.

Signs and wonders. What is important is what they mean, what they teach. They concern our fundamental sense of identity. They speak to who we are in the sight of God. They are not mere displays of power for amusement and entertainment. That would be power without wisdom. That would mean a loss of ourselves as well, which is why Jesus points us to what the signs signify, to what they mean.

Ironically, the iconic word – a sign, we might say – for this generation is ‘*the selfie*’, an image of ourselves. It speaks profoundly to the uncertainties of our world and age. An Inuit *inukshuk* is a sign that signals that ‘*we are here*’ in the form of a pile of stones resembling abstractly the human form, itself an image of our humanity. Timothy Findley, in his classic novel, *The Wars*, comments on the impact of photographs. He observes that in 1915 the attitude of people in photos undergoes a change from a kind of reticence and avoidance about being photographed to the desire to be seen in photographs precisely at the point when the enormous destructiveness of the First World War began to become apparent. It is as if we want to confirm our own existence by being seen even if only in photos.

As you know only too well, our own age is image-fixated too. As if events are not real unless there is a photo, a you-tube video, a selfie. As if you do not exist except in photos. The selfie, as many have remarked, signals our contemporary narcissism, a kind of obsession about ourselves. It is an aspect of the culture of “*look at me looking at you looking at me*”, the culture of Kim Kardashian taking a selfie of herself in the mirror. It is a kind of self-idolatry.

But it also signals a profound uncertainty about ourselves as selves. The sad and sorry business of *'nude selfies'*, particularly among teenagers shows this, I think. Not altogether unlike giving monkeys machine guns, a generation has been empowered with digital devices but lack the wisdom to use them properly. The *'nude selfie'*, pardon the pun, reveals the problem. What is going on? You turn yourself into an object which in turn becomes an object for others! Is the image 'you'? The real 'you'? To think that the image is you is the mistake, the contradiction. It leads to abuse and misuse by you and by others. It is power without wisdom. It reveals a profound uncertainty about a sense of self. Paradoxically, the selfie is the ultimate unselfie! It reveals an emptiness about the self as well as a kind of self-idolatry.

The teaching of the Epiphany is that our sense of self is found in God and in God making himself known and making known his will for us. It counters the loss of self in contemporary culture whether in the selfie phenomenon or in the exuberant claims made by some, paradoxically in the scientific world, about how the self is an utter illusion. In the view of Yuval Noah Harari in *"Homo Deus"*, for example, we are nothing more than *"organic algorithms"*. Despite constantly employing the idea of the narrative self and the experiential self, he argues that there is no self. There is no 'you'. Man as God is really Man as digitally enhanced, a souped-up algorithm since God, insofar as we can talk about God, is really only an image for a super-algorithm.

Our lessons tonight offer another view of our humanity. *"Remember this,"* Isaiah says, *"I am God and there none other like me ... You - we - have been borne by me from your birth ... I will carry, says the Lord, and I will save."* It is all about who we are with God. And in the second lesson, we are given another set of miracles. There is the astounding hold on the truth of God by the Syro-Phoenician woman, a woman from outside of Israel, who seeks the healing of her daughter possessed of a demon. Her words of tenacity inform our approach to the Eucharist. We are fed with the children's crumbs and it always more than enough if, like the second healing, we are open to God's healing touch and word, *"Ephphatha"*.

We are provided with a vision of God and his will for our humanity. We participate in what we behold, in what is opened to us. Such is the mystical theology of our liturgy. Our ears are opened and our tongues loosed to sing the praises of God. We are gathered into the mystical life of God through prayer and praise. This is the teaching and the vocation of our humanity.

The point of this epiphany teaching is wonderfully captured by the poet, George Herbert. We find the truth of ourselves in God.

Thou hast but two rare cabinets full of treasure,
The *Trinitie*, and *Incarnation*:
Thou hast unlockt them both,
And made them jewels to betroth

The work of thy creation
Unto thy self in everlasting pleasure.

Such is who we are in the sight of God.

“Ephphatha, that is, Be opened”

Fr. David Curry

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Evensong, St. George's, Hfx