

## Epiphany III (21 January 2024)

“BE not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

+In the Name of...

Don't you wish we could take all the excitement of Christmas and bottle it? All the greenery, the poinsettias, the manger scene, and the magi should have rightfully been taken down on the 13th, the Octave of the Epiphany. Because it was a Saturday, I decided that we should leave them up long enough to get one more Sunday out of them. Members of the Parish gave offerings to buy the decorations and then took time out of their Christmas Eve schedules to decorate, so I thought we should get a little more enjoyment out of them. But then the snow hit... and then the ice...

Well, you get the idea. I promise it will all be down before you return next Sunday!

Of course, there is the excitement we have when we decorate that is totally lacking from taking down and putting away. I know there is the practical side, like wrapping up the glass ornaments so they do not break, or (at least in the house where I grew up), fitting each and every light back into its particular slot in the Styrofoam container. But decorating is fun, undecorating is not.

By extension, Christmas is fun, evangelization is not. At least, it is not as much fun. Maybe it is how we think of evangelization. Anglicanism was taken all across the globe during the expansion of the British Empire, often by Anglo-Catholic clergymen whose bishops were all too eager to get rid of them back in England! But Anglicans of any stripe are not known for their door-to-door evangelization activities. I would wager that few passers-by who encounter the missionaries up by the hospital mistake them for Anglicans. Likewise, when the doorbell rings

and the owner of the house looks through the window and sees someone with tracts and a Bible, do you think his first thought is, “Oh, it’s the Anglicans again!” Of course not, but this time of the Church Year is really about evangelization in general, and specifically evangelization to the non-Jewish people of the world.

We all know that THE Epiphany was on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, and it celebrates the arrival of the Magi to visit Jesus Christ. But we are still in Epiphanytide. (Liturgical nerds might be interested to know that the length of Epiphanytide varies from year to year, because the date of Christmas is fixed but the date of Easter is not. Easter is early this year, so we shall begin the pre-Lenten, or “esima” Sundays next week. I know what you are thinking: “I still have Christmas cookies left, and soon Father is going to be yammering on about giving up chocolate!” True, but I still have Christmas cookies left too!)

Some Scripture scholars argue that the Epiphany does not just consist of the Magi coming to see the Christ child, although

that is the first of three episodes. They contend that the Epiphany continues with the baptism of Christ and concludes with the wedding feast at Cana. How appropriate that our readings for the last several weeks include those lessons! The Jews were expecting a Messiah, so that is who it was assumed Christ came for. The Magi, travelling from many miles away, were decidedly not Jewish. Hence, the first indication that Christ came for all people, although some will choose not to follow Him, regardless of their genetic background.

Last week on the Second Sunday of Epiphany we heard during the Gospel the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus, of course, had committed no sin so He did not need baptismal regeneration like the rest of us. He was baptized to show us the way to Heaven and to confirm to John the Baptist that He was, in fact, the Messiah. John's mission to prepare the way for the Messiah was complete. The interesting twist was at the end of this scene, with God the Father stating, "This is my beloved Son, with Whom I am well

pleased.” The Jews were expecting a political liberator but not one claiming divinity, so this statement added a new element: not only was Jesus the Messiah for Whom the Jews had been waiting, but He was the Son of God and could liberate them from the sins that were oppressing them. Jesus comes into His full ministry here, completely conscious of His relationship to the Father.

Manifestation No. Two, to Christ Himself.

Today we find ourselves in one of the most famous of Gospel passages. Famous because changing water into wine puts a twinkle in the eyes of many an Anglican, while making Baptists a little nervous! All joking aside, it is Christ’s first public miracle. It is manifestation No. 3, proclaiming His identity to the world.

So, it would seem we have our marching orders: Christ has manifested Himself to the world, but not everyone has paid attention, so that leaves us to proclaim Him to those who do not know Him yet. But then we have this strange epistle. It is not strange in and of itself, but it seems rather abrupt, like it comes to

us out of left field when we have been presented with one important event after another in Christ's early life and ministry. Biblical scholars say that while this is written to the Church in Rome, it is not instructing them in how to treat one another, but how to treat those outside the fold. That is, treat non-Christians as well as you would Christians. The assumption is that the Romans were already treating one another as they would want to be treated, to borrow a famous phrase! Is that an assumption we can make at the Parish of St. Mark in 2024? Are we so "wise in our own conceits" that is, wise in our own eyes, that no one else can tell us anything that could possibly be of any value? Are we so ready to repay evil for evil, that we are missing the fact that we are trying to pay back people in our lives now for past evils done by people who are no longer in our lives? Is wrath just seething under the surface in our lives, waiting for an opportunity for us to avenge ourselves? That is one of the ways to tell whether your anger is righteous or not: if you want revenge, then it is not. If you

answered “yes” to any of these questions, then St. Paul is talking to you, to me, to us, to this Parish. I promise you this: we will not grow as a parish as long as we continue to fight old battles. Full stop. Not in attendance, not financially, and not spiritually. It will not happen. Yes, the Parish was wronged in the past. Yes, it went through some terrible times. But at some point, we have to put that behind us and move on. I believe that God is calling us to do great things in this place. We have a beautiful plant and dedicated people in our pews. Let us take the hurt and sorrow of the past and exchange it for the excitement that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. It will be contagious; just you watch!

+In the Name...