

The Epiphany of the Lord, Yr. A
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Today's feast, Epiphany, used to be celebrated on January 6, which made it the twelfth day of Christmas, concluding the Christmas Season. The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek meaning “to show forth, or manifest”, and so is used for this remembrance of Jesus being manifested as the Christ to the gentiles, in the persons of the magi.

The older January 6 celebration included not only the magi but also the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, and, in some places, the wedding feast of Cana; which sounds like a real grab bag until you consider that they all three have to do with ... epiphany: the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God. At his baptism the voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased”. At Cana, Jesus worked his first miracle by turning water into abundant, choice wine at a wedding banquet-- an OT symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven. That story concludes like this:

“In this way Jesus revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.” (Jn. 2:11)
The magi, the baptism, Cana—tied together as epiphany, manifestations of Jesus as the Christ, Christ who is the manifestation of the Father.

Pope John Paul II, perhaps taking his cue from this ancient tradition, developed what he called the “Luminous Mysteries” of the rosary, occasions that showed forth the true identity of Jesus; namely the baptism in the Jordan, the wedding feast at Cana, the proclamation of the kingdom, the transfiguration, and the institution of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is an ongoing sign and reminder of who Jesus is-- Emmanuel, God with us.

But, of course, the Eucharist is a sign, not a knock-you-over kind of proof. The real presence of Christ under the sign of bread and wine still requires faith. In fact, none of the signs that Jesus gave were indisputable proofs. People who didn't want to accept him found other ways of explaining them. They said he drove out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. They denounced his healings as sinful because he did them on the Sabbath. They explained his resurrection by saying his disciples stole his body from the tomb.

So, why isn't God more obvious? Why does He only give us signs that can be disputed and denied? Well, the time will come when He will knock us over, when he comes in glory, like lightning flashing from the east to the west. But this is the time for signs because this is the time of invitation, of opportunity, of preparation. This is the time when God is forming the creature of clay into His own sons and daughters, and we become children of God by loving God and neighbor (Mt. 5:45), with love that is a free choice, not compelled by the overwhelming presence of the Almighty.

You might say that God vacates a little space to accommodate our freedom, but sends signs to remind us what our freedom is for. What is most noble in us, God's greatest gifts to us become truly our own when we freely accept them and choose to act upon them. Faith is most truly faith when we stay faithful even in darkness. Trust is most truly trust in the midst of difficulty.

The time will come when our faith will be gloriously vindicated. In the meantime, God gives us signs, confirming what Jesus revealed and coaxing us along on our pilgrimage of faith

Anyone who seeks God and is perceptive enough to notice will notice signs in their own personal life of God's active presence. God also gives signs to the world that He is guiding salvation history to its conclusion.

Think of Guadalupe – Mary appearing as Mother of God and Mother of the Indians. That sign coaxed millions of Indians to accept Christ, who is the manifestation of the true and living God. She was also a sign to the Spaniards to take their own Christian faith more seriously by seeing the conquered Indians as their brothers and sisters. They looked at their Blessed Mother and had to see an Indian maiden, God's way of telling them, “Stop obstructing the spread of my gospel with your cruel arrogance and your greed.”

Think of Lourdes. Where else in the world, or in history, is there a place of miraculous signs with an established medical bureau to confirm, scientifically, that there is no natural explanation? Medical doctors of all faiths and no faith are welcome and have served on this bureau. It would be like the TV faith healer being subjected to examination by the Mayo Clinic.

Think of Fatima, 100 years ago, 1917, and the great solar phenomena that were witnessed by tens of thousands of people, believers and skeptics alike. It was a great sign, confirming the message of Fatima, which is really the message of the gospel-- repent, believe, pray, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; a sign that was further confirmed when the assassination attempt on John Paul II fulfilled the third secret.

Some think that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been converted and so Fatima is one for the history books. But what were the errors that Our Lady warned Russia would spread throughout the world? Communism, but, more to the point, militant, coercive atheism. The Soviet Union is no more, but atheism is still with us, increasingly militant and coercive in countries that were called “The Free World” during the Cold War. Prayer and penance are still necessary weapons of resistance.

Meanwhile, back in the Caliphate, reports have been surfacing from Iraq and Syria of a new evangelization. It is not being carried out by the ancient Christian communities there,

which have largely been exterminated or driven out, but by Muslims who grew disgusted with Islamic violence, read contraband Bibles, had dream-vision encounters with Jesus, and accepted baptism.

(cf. “Dreams and Visions”, and “Killing Christians”, by Tom Doyle) They are sharing their new Christian faith with other Muslims, many of whom are receptive. What was said of the first wave of persecution by ancient Rome can be said of the persecution by ISIS-- “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church”. In the midst of the humanitarian disaster of the Middle East, this sign has appeared that Christ is alive and well, and sending the Gospel out to all the nations before he returns in glory.

All these public signs I have mentioned are epiphany, manifestations of God, confirming what He has revealed through Jesus Christ, coaxing us along on our pilgrimage of faith. But they are only signs. If you need knock-me-over proof, you'll have to wait a little longer. Meanwhile, the rest of us will be keeping the faith-- repenting, praying, and loving our neighbor – conducting ourselves like those parable servants with whom the Lord is well-pleased when he returns.