



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, January 6, 2019

The Feast of the Epiphany

JIM WHITE

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9 | Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 | Ephesians 3:1-12 | Matthew 2:1-12

A CALL TO JUSTICE AND LOVE

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

TODAY IS THE FEAST OF EPIPHANY, one of the great days in the cycle of the Christian year.

As you probably know, the word “epiphany” comes from a Greek word meaning “a showing forth.” Thus in the Gospel we have a “showing forth” of the infant Jesus to the three wise men, and in the epistle Paul affirms his central mission to “show forth” the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. The Psalm is a prayer that the king may have justice of a kind that will “show forth” so brightly that even the Gentile kings will come to pay tribute. And in the passage from Isaiah we seem to be given the essence of epiphany: “Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

I.

In reading and rereading these passages I found myself thinking not just about each passage but about the relations among them.

How are we to imagine those relations? Maybe—as a kind of experiment—we might think of these passages in musical terms: as four songs, each standing alone but creating together a new composition, which has its own melody and makes its own epiphany.

A.

Let's start with the passage from Isaiah, which begins with these beautiful words: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Here in a wonderful song Isaiah is imagining what the restored Jerusalem will be like. Her sons and daughters will return from all over the world; Gentile nations “will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn,” and they will be welcomed. This is a beautiful and idealized image of the holy city flourishing in perfection—a showing forth of God in his people, as light in a world of darkness.

B.

The Psalm takes a different form, as a prayer—a prayer that the rule of the king may be just:

“Give the king your Justice, O God. . .

May he judge your righteousness and your poor with justice...

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,

Give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

This passage adds a crucial moral dimension to Isaiah's celebration of the kingdom of light, namely, that to be worthy of its place in the world, that kingdom must be just. Justice must live in our hearts.

Why does this prayer need to be made at all? I think it comes from fear, fear that the king, who has such great power, will not be just. A reasonable fear: how many kings in the history of the world have been just?

This is a fear we ourselves know, about ourselves. We are a rich and powerful nation, but the Psalm is telling us—what in a sense we already know--that this means nothing, unless we put justice at the center of our concerns.

Do we do that? We certainly have not always done so. Our country was in large part founded on two really awful crimes against humanity: racial slavery and the genocide of native peoples. Since then we have struggled to change our ways, especially with respect to racial slavery and its consequences. We are still struggling. We are a long way from being the kind of city that might be greeted by Isaiah with the words: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

I know historical comparisons are hard to draw, but I have a sense that as a nation we are at something of a low point, a point of darkness. Not only does the government seem not much interested in making our country, or our world, more just, I am not sure there is a strong public sense, among the people, that we should strive to achieve justice more fully than we do.

There are exceptions of course, but I sense a general cultural tendency to think that the sufferings of others really have nothing to do with us. Our culture seems to be telling us, and our children, that the pursuit of money and power for their own sake is a good life—though we know perfectly well that it will end with ashes in the mouth.

How about us in this church? Do we have an image of justice as a central value in our lives? Do we have the idea of a just community as a real possibility?

The Psalm prays that the king may be given the justice of God. We too can make that prayer, in deep humility both for ourselves and for our government.

C.

Our first two songs are, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” and: “Give the king your justice, O God.” I can almost hear them, the first one

beautiful, followed by a response in a decidedly minor key. Neither song is complete without the other.

Now: What is the song of Paul in the Epistle, and how does it connect with the other two?

To start with, there is nothing kingly in him at all. He is a poor wandering preacher, at the moment in prison. He is one to whom the divine mystery has been revealed and who has been called to preach that mystery to the Gentiles: “this grace was given to me, to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.” It is this ministry to the Gentiles for which he has been imprisoned.

In the Jewish world in which Paul grew up the sharpest line separating people into opposing groups was the line between Jew and Gentile. Paul obliterates that line. For him, what brings us into God’s presence is not our belonging to a particular religious community, with its characteristic traditions and rituals, but our faith—our capacity to see with an inner eye the presence of God in the world, and within us, and to turn our hearts towards him.

Paul is not praying for justice to the Gentiles, he is performing it.

D.

The last song is the most familiar one, the story of the Magi—the “three kings”, as tradition has called them, all Gentiles—coming to worship the most unlikely king of all, a baby born to a poor family on a cold dark night, a baby who will become the redeemer of the world.

Here Jesus himself offers an epiphany: shining forth as a star in the sky and as a baby in a cradle.

The only real king we see here is Herod, a violent and cruel and deceitful man, a liar and a fraud, who sees in the baby such a threat to his identity that he wants to kill him. Failing in that, he is furious and orders all children in Jerusalem two years and younger to be killed—a vicious slaughter in a world of darkness.

Herod’s presence adds a new note, a grim one, that of real and unapologetic evil in the world. The world in which Jesus will live, and show us how to live, has deep evil within it, evil that kills.

II.

I think the heart of each of these passages is justice: Isaiah’s vision of the flourishing city that will welcome the hitherto despised Gentiles; the Psalm’s prayer for God’s justice in the king; Paul’s performance of justice, in reaching out to the Gentiles; and most of all the presence of the infant who will change the whole world, the infant who does not speak, but is.

A.

Can the mere presence of a newborn baby make us feel the need for justice? Of course it can, when the baby is threatened with murder, as Jesus is by Herod. But even without such threats, I think the newborn child, just by his or her existence, can make us feel the need for justice in a bone-deep way.

One way to think of justice is that at its heart it is the recognition of the infinite and equal value of every human being, the cherishing of every person’s full humanity.

Everything else really depends on that: good laws and fair procedures, a functioning democracy, responsible practices, the invention and management of just institutions, fundamental social equality.

I think it is this sense of justice—as the recognition of the equal and infinite value of every person—that underlies Jesus’ central ethical teachings: that we should love our neighbor as ourselves and that we should do unto others what we would have them do unto us. For him justice is a form of love.

B.

When we see a nursery full of newborn babies, especially in a public hospital, we are directly faced with a call for justice: here are dozens of innocent children born into radically different circumstances, with very different predictable futures. We cannot help loving them, and we know that some will have every advantage, others few or none. This is not right, and we know it.

From God’s point of view—and for the moment from ours—these babies are utterly equal human beings, to be equally loved, with an equal claim not only have to food and shelter, but to be able as they grow to engage fully in all the activities and relationships that make life meaningful, even sacred. True justice would recognize that fact. None of these babies chose or deserves his or her situation, whether good or bad.

The story of Jesus’ birth into poverty and weakness and ignominy is story of the birth of every person, for each of us is born into an unjust world. It is a showing forth of God, an epiphany, that is also a call to justice.

It is also a reminder that all newborn infants deserve full recognition of the uniqueness and value of their souls, and they will not get it.

C.

I think these four passages, in quite different ways, insist upon the centrality of justice to the Christian life. For Isaiah it is not the main theme, but it is important, as he imagines the city of justice welcoming the Gentiles. The Psalm is a prayer for justice; the epistle records Paul’s performance of justice; and the Gospel is a call to justice.

Each passage has its own particular song, as I suggested, but, as you might gather from what I have said, when they are read one after another I have the feeling that there is another song being sung here—as sometimes in an actual musical performance I am told one will hear tones that no one is playing, but are created by the sympathetic vibrations of their voices or instruments.

My sense of what we hear today in this mysterious way is nothing less than the voice and presence of God, issuing a call to justice as a form of love. He wants us to hear and respond to this call, this call to recognize, so far as we can, the full humanity of every person we meet.

This is an epiphany of its own, a shining forth of God in a world of darkness.

AMEN