

The Feast of the Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

Trinity Church, January 6, 2019

Kingdom of the Heart

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. This celebration begins a season when we remember the showing forth of Jesus to the world. From Matthew's birth narrative we recall the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. Wise men, popularly known as the Three Kings, came from the East to worship the Messiah. In the story, Matthew describes Jesus as the King of the Jews who is savior not only of Israel but for Gentiles as well. From the beginning of his Gospel to the last chapter we receive the commission to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 28:19) The good news of Jesus is meant for all people.

Matthew makes it clear that the King of the Jews isn't Herod, Emperor Augustus, or any other ruler of the Roman Empire. "Roman imperial theology always talked of a predestined rule over the 'whole world' and the 'inhabited earth' – and not just over Italy or even the Mediterranean."

(“The First Christmas”, p. 146) Matthew shows that the ruler to whom homage is due is Jesus, who came among us to establish a kingdom of the heart, not an imperial empire.

In our own political life we experience the pageantry of candidates seeking office. They compete with each other to convince the public that they are each the best choice for new leadership. Religious principles are often mixed in with the rhetoric to show who God’s choice might be. Some aspirants in this political game might even hope to establish a Christian kingdom, perhaps like that established by the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Might, majesty, dominion, and power would dwell within the rule of government. In such a society, it is thought that God would be well pleased; and of course, in this new divine right of presidency, for example, conditional love would be administered to those who adhere to the values of the State.

Having read a little history we know that when this mixture of power and religion has been tried it has turned to disaster. Perhaps the best thing that could have happened for early Christians was to be free to come out of the catacombs to express their faith; but it would also be the worst thing that could have happened, because Roman imperialism took over. As the Church grew in power with the establishment, it

took on the ways of power and control. By the eleventh century the Church was feared as one would a government. This unleashed the tragic era of the Crusades from the 11th to 14th centuries. Military expeditions from Christian Europe advanced to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims. The devastating repercussions of that venture are felt to this day with animosity and violence enflaming the East and the West because of religious beliefs – and the need to enforce those beliefs with government control.

That is not what Jesus had in mind; and even though Matthew referred to Jesus as the King of the Jews, it was not a military empire that was anticipated. That, of course, is one reason why Jesus was not received as the Messiah because he failed to follow the pattern of leaders like King David. People were looking for a kingdom of this earth; but as Jesus said to Pilate when Pilate asked him if he was the King of the Jews, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.” (John 18:36) And as we see in daily news, earthly kingdoms continue to fight to preserve their leaders and constituents.

We have seen in history that Jesus’ observation was correct. Even when we try to create a theocracy -- God’s

kingdom on earth -- it fails because of those old fashioned foibles called sin and greed. Any establishment, even the Church, has to go through the process of cleansing and forgiveness, death and resurrection, renewal and rebirth, to witness a godly way of life. While it is an organizational process, the community is made up of individuals; and one of the most effective ways for renewal to be accomplished is on an individual basis. Just as a song expresses it, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me" – so must we begin this personal process of cleansing and renewal if we hope to enjoy the blessings of peace and love in community.

The kingdom of God begins in the individual heart by acknowledging the presence of the Spirit within us and by nurturing that seed of blessing as we proceed on our journey of faith. The motivation for this activity should exceed the desire for personal well-being; for love, the greatest of all blessings, can only be known as it is given away from heart to heart. That is what Matthew and John's "King of the Jews" did. He gave himself to us in love, even suffering death on a cross, that we might learn the true meaning of love and forgiveness – a love so strong, as John put it, that one is willing to give one's own life for a friend. (John 15:13)

In this season of Epiphany, when we seek to show forth the love of God as lived in Jesus, we can strive to do our part to express this love through our outreach programs, in worship and assistance to the needy, and as demonstrated in the lives we lead. Our efforts to be evangelists don't need to include a soap box from which to haranguing the public with shouts of Jesus. A preferable and more believable tact, especially for Episcopalians, is to live our ordinary lives with integrity. The best sermon we can hear or preach will not come from the pulpit. It will come from the lives we lead -- from the kingdom of the heart, shared heart to heart.