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The Epiphany of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 10, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

In order to really hear the message that is proclaimed to us in the Gospel today, it's very important that we situate this incident within the context of what was happening in the Jewish Christian community for whom Matthew wrote the Gospel. We may not be so aware, but we need to remind ourselves that the Gospels, like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were not written down immediately after Jesus left. The gospels developed out of oral traditions that were passed on for a number of years before anything was written down.

The Gospel of Matthew came quite a while after St. Paul began to write his letters, which began about the year 50. This meant the Gospel of Matthew came about the year 80, and something was happening in the community that made it important for Matthew as he put together the Gospel to draw from sources that would help to settle a problem that was arising. The problem goes back to the very beginning of the church practically, shortly after the disciples went out and began to spread the word, the good news, about Jesus, that he was risen, that he was living among them.

It was first to only Jewish people -- they were a group of Jewish people, disciples of Jesus, all of them Jews -- and they went first to synagogues and to the temple, where they were spreading the good news. But then, as we hear St. Paul tell us in that second lesson today, the mystery was not made known to past generations, but only now, through revelations given to apostles and prophets. Now the non-Jewish people share the inheritance in Christ Jesus. Non-Jews are incorporated and are to enjoy the promise; this is the good news.

Paul was the first to begin to spread the word that God had come, God was revealed in Jesus, not just for the chosen people to whom Jesus preached and all of the disciples who had gathered around him were -- Jewish people. It wasn't just for them, but this was a huge breakthrough and it caused a lot of disturbance in the church at the beginning. It wasn't settled until around 15 years after Jesus had died and risen. They had what we've come to call now the Council of Jerusalem, where disputes that had arisen were finally settled.

Did people who were to come into the Christian community have to first be Jews or not? That's what some people were requiring -- if you're going to join the disciples, then you first have to become a Jew, be circumcised. There were a lot of problems over this until it was settled. But now it was about the year 80, it's starting to crop up again. The community for whom Matthew wrote his gospel was almost a completely Jewish community. Other people were starting to come in and were not being welcomed.

So Matthew puts into his gospel this very extraordinary story about how these sages, or wise people, wise men,

we call them, or sometimes called magi -- astrologers is really what they were -- people who studied the stars to try to discern human knowledge and direction, something that was forbidden actually by the Jewish law. You were now allowed to let the stars be your guide. Astrology was forbidden, yet that's what these people were and Matthew makes a point of that -- the people who study the stars for guidance from God.

They are the ones that come to Jerusalem then, looking for this newborn king. Herod was very fearful of them. He was a tyrant and his throne was not very secure, so we hear the trick he tried to play on them by getting them to come back and tell him exactly where he is and when was he born. Herod had very devious reasons for doing that, but he was tricked because God sent them back a different way, but then we remember in a short time Herod brought about that massacre of all the infants around Bethlehem, the holy innocents, we call them.

Again, the main point of Matthew telling this story is to remind that community that it wasn't just to the chosen people that Jesus came, but God revealed God in Jesus for all nations. That's why we're reminded in the first lesson today, in that passage from Isaiah that was written so many centuries before, about how Jerusalem itself was to be restored, but then Isaiah goes far beyond the chosen people when he talks about the restoration:

"Arise, shine! For your light has come. The glory of Yahweh rises upon you. "Night still covers the earth and gloomy clouds veil the peoples, but God now rises and over you, God's glory appears," and here's what will happen: "Nations," see, all the gentiles, "will come to your light and rulers to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around and see, they're all gathered and come to you, your sons from afar, your daughters tenderly carried." And then toward the end, "The riches of the sea will be turned to you. The wealth of the nations will come to you," and then even a foreshadowing of the gifts that these sages bring, "They will come bringing with them gold and incense, all singing in praise of God."

So what Isaiah had spoken about so many hundreds of years before was now being fulfilled in this story that Matthew tells, to remind his community that it's not just the chosen people, God is not selective in whom God calls; God calls all people -- the whole human family -- and that's a very important thing for us to realize today. First of all, we should be very thankful. All of us who are here are gentiles from the nations, not from the chosen people, so it's because of God's special revelation to Paul that all people -- this is the good news, God calls everyone, the whole human family.

As we reflect upon that, as I said, first of all, we give thanks to God because now the good news is proclaimed in our midst. We're able to hear it and are called to follow it. But we have to go beyond that too. I think one of the things maybe that we need to think about as we reflect on this story -- and it is a story that Matthew puts together to teach us this lesson about the universality of the call of God to all people. One of the things that maybe we have to do now is kind of reverse the pattern.

Before it was the chosen people who were exclusive, wanted to keep out the gentiles and had to be reminded that God calls everyone. In the history of our church, at times we've been very negative to the chosen people, to the Jewish people. In fact, there's been a history of hatred and violence even against the Jews, [which] culminated in the holocaust of World War II -- a genocide, trying to destroy that whole nation from which Jesus came.

I have a commentary here about the scriptures for today. I think the way this author, the scripture scholar, puts it is very important for us to hear and respond to. He says, "For centuries, we gentiles, followers of Jesus, have managed to live comfortably with imagery that pictured the Israelite tradition to be the discarded husk of Christianity, something that could be symbolized in renaissance paintings as ancient, architectural ruins." We put down the chosen people and that Jewish tradition.

"Fortunately," he says, "we now live in a moment of church history enlightened by the teachings of Vatican II on the matter of our relationship with Judaism. In the declaration about the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions, the church, now drawing on the wisdom of the New Testament, speaks fresh words to our contemporary context of religious pluralism. It's an appropriate moment to reflect on some of these words."

Here is what the council says: "The church," that is, all of us, "cannot forget that we received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God, in God's inexpressible mercy, established the ancient covenant." It was through the Jewish people that God first made the covenant with the human family. "Nor can we forget that we draw nourishment from the good olive tree," the Jewish people symbolized by an olive tree, "onto which the wild olive branches of the gentiles have been grafted."

That's an image that St. Paul has used when writing to the church at Rome, that we Gentiles are like wild branches that have been grafted onto the true vine, the chosen people. Epiphany -- this feast is a good time to remember our roots, cherish our roots in Judaism, and to remember that the covenant that God made with the chosen people has never been revoked, for as Paul said regarding his fellow Jews, the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.

We need to have a reverence for that tradition of Judaism that's the tradition from which we come. We need to make reparations for all the times that, down through history, and as recently as 1965, we still were praying for ones we called the "perfidious Jews," that they would be converted. We need to recognize that that covenant of the Jewish people with God, as Paul says, is irrevocable, and that's the olive tree to which we've been grafted.

Now, as I say, we kind of reverse the message that Matthew was preaching to the community back then, where he was trying to get them to accept the Gentiles into the community, as Gentiles, without becoming Jews. But now we have to be very inclusive and respect and cherish the tradition of Judaism, and beyond that, I think this message today for the Feast of Epiphany for all of us, the community of disciples of Jesus whom we are now, is that all of us must continue to have a spirit of inclusivity.

God is a welcoming God. God has called all peoples of all nations to be part of God's people -- the whole human family -- so we have to try to not have that spirit that sometimes seems, in the present time, in the present age, to enter into the church, that certain people aren't welcome For a variety of reasons, we say, "No, you're not welcome" -- people in a second marriage, gay people, lesbian people - "You're not welcome. Don't come." We don't sometimes say that explicitly, but we give that attitude, that impression. That isn't the way of Jesus.

That's not the welcoming community that Jesus established, so we have to rid ourselves of any sense of exclusivity. The family of God is the whole human family and we must try to have that spirit that we welcome

everyone. Not that we try to force our beliefs on other people, not that we give up our own beliefs, but we have to be people who are like that community that Matthew wrote to, and that we are the followers of -- people who will be welcoming to whoever comes.

That's, I think, the real message of this feast day, that God is a God who calls everyone, and the whole human family is called to be part of God's people. We are the ones who have come to know God in a special way through Jesus, so we reveal God through Jesus as God is revealed to us through Jesus, and we welcome anyone who wants to hear God's message together with us as it comes to us through Jesus. I pray that we can be that kind of welcoming, loving, inclusive people, and thereby really be the family of God that we're called to be.

[Bishop Gumbleton's homily of Jan. 6, 2008, was preached at the Holy Family Chapel at St. John's Center in Plymouth, Michigan.]

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