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The Epiphany of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 10, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

For our reflection on the Scriptures today I think it's very important for us to start with the message that we hear from St. Paul where he tells us, "By revelation God gave me the knowledge of God's mysterious design and I have tried to explain this in a few words. On reading them you will have some idea of how I understand the mystery of Christ." Then he goes on to say, "This is the Good News. This is the Good News. Now the non-Jewish people share the inheritance in Christ Jesus. The non-Jews are incorporated and enjoy the promise." The Good News - now that Jesus has come into the world; that God has entered into human history.

Paul is reemphasizing, in fact, what God had first said to Abraham and Sarah. "You will be the parents of multitudes of people from all places of the earth." But that Good News began to be narrowed down as the Jewish religion developed and the covenants were entered into. More and more they were thought of as exclusive. God saying only to the Chosen People, "You are my people. I am your God." Paul is saying, "No, that's wrong. It goes far beyond the Chosen People. Jesus is part of the whole human race, part of all of human history." So Jesus, by becoming one of us, enables everyone to share in that promise of God -- "You will be my people. I will be your God." Not just the Chosen People, the Jewish people.

Yes, Jesus came as a Jew. He lived as a Jew. He died as a Jew -- never having set up a Church -- only calling together a community of disciples to carry on his Word. But then there too it began to happen again what happened with the Chosen People. There were those who began to say, "No, it's exclusive -- only Christians. Only those who explicitly acknowledge Jesus as the Savior will be saved."

But Paul is saying, "No, the Good News is different." And in fact, that's what we learn in the Gospel lesson today. The people who came to adore Jesus, as Matthew described it, were from the East which would have meant, perhaps, the country of Iraq or the country of Iran, which at that point was Persia. They were probably seers of some sort or priests. Many people think of the Zoroastrian religion. They came and they went back praising God. This is all to show us that Jesus came not just for the Chosen People, not just for those who call themselves Christian but for all people. They didn't change their religion when they left. They were still Zoroastrian priests, but Jesus had come. God had entered into human history for everyone.

That's the same thing that you discover if you listen carefully to what Isaiah was saying. God promising, "Nations will come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes roundabout and see they are all gathered and come to you ? This sight will make your face radiant, your heart throbbing and full. The riches of the sea will return to you, the wealth of the nations will come to you." Then he goes on to describe how people will come "from Midian and Ephah. Those from Sheba will come bringing with them gold and incense." People coming from everywhere, returning to the Promised Land to rebuild for the Jewish people their

Temple, their Kingdom. But again the message is so clear -- God came, in Jesus, for everyone and all share in this great Good News. Not just a few of us but everyone.

There are some very important implications if we begin to think about what this Feast of the Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus, really means. It seems that somehow -- every religion probably does this to some extent -- people begin to think, "I have the truth. We have the truth. No one else has the truth. We have the whole truth. You must believe like we believe or you're not faithful to God."

But that's not what the message is today. It's that God speaks to all in various ways. Those Zoroastrian priests somehow through lights in the heavens began to discover God. People of other religious traditions today discover God in their own way -- God working in and through them and their religious traditions. We cannot narrow it down so that only a few will know the truth, have the truth. We find truth in all religions. And, of course, if we really accepted that, we would not have religious wars that we have had in the past -- Christians going into the Middle East to destroy the Muslims who had taken over part of that area. We would not be threatened with religious wars today, if only we would understand that God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways and God's thoughts are as far above our ways and our thoughts as the heavens are above the earth. We always try to narrow it down. Make God's ways our ways, but they're not.

God acts outside and beyond any religious tradition. The spirit of God moves where it will. So we can find truth in other religions. And we need to understand that and accept that and respect that -- that we do not have this so-called clash of civilizations which would be a clash of religious traditions that somehow we seem to be building up to.

Very recently Pope Benedict made a very beautiful step in this direction when he went to Turkey and, for the first time, the leader of the Christian Church went into the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, stood alongside of the Grand Mufti, with him turned towards Mecca and prayed. They prayed together to the same God.

We are all brothers and sisters in the human family; all sons and daughters of God. We need to understand that and accept it so that we begin, each of us, all of us, to have a greater respect, for example, for the Jews. Repent we Christians, how we have hated the Jews -- even sometimes expressed in our Scripture -- down through history, culminating in the horror of the Holocaust. Christian nations destroying, trying to destroy the whole Jewish race. That's so wrong. If we begin to understand that God is alive and present in all people, in all religious traditions, then we must respect each other.

These days it's especially important as we begin to understand that Muslims are not violent fanatics who are out to kill and destroy. Yes, there may be some like that, just as there are Christians like that, but that's not the religion. We need to try to understand what Islam really is and how God speaks through Islam. We must respect it as Pope Benedict did. Pray with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Pray for peace and justice in the Middle East. Work to make that happen.

But now some people might say "Well, then what difference does it make whether you're Christian or not Christian." Well, Christian is being called by Jesus -- we hear God speaking to us through Jesus -- and to be part of his community which, he did call together people to hear his message, carry it on and to be what the [Second] Vatican Council describes as the Church -- "Lumen Gentium" -- Light of the Nations.

If we really come to understand God in Jesus who is revealed to us, our lives will be so different. The problem is we sometimes accept *this* part of Jesus' teaching but not *that* part. We have to hear his *whole* message, study how he lived, how he acted, what he said. Follow it. Jesus came into the world to be the Light of the World -- which he is. If we come to know Jesus deeply and follow Jesus, we, too, will be the Light of the World.

This does happen when we begin to live the way of Jesus. It happens everyday here at St. Leo's when we reach out to our neighbors and try to serve them. I saw it happen very beautifully, and many of you were there, last Monday when our parish community welcomed our guests downstairs, brought food, cooked it, prepared it, served them. I noticed especially how some would make an effort to go up to each person, shake hands, greet that person. That's being the Light of the World. That's bringing the kindness, the goodness, the compassion, the care of Jesus into our neighborhood and into our community. We need to do that towards one another -- be Jesus to each other.

If we, as the Light of the World, the Light of the Nations, lived out the teachings of Jesus as a nation -- we say sometimes we are a Christian nation -- we would not be at war. We would not be planning a new "surge" into Iraq. We would be finding other ways to peace.

So there is a very real challenge for us. Yes, we must respect and revere and have high regard for the truth that we discover in other religious traditions and respect the people who are Muslims, who are Jews, who are Hindus, whatever, but we also have to try to be faithful to what we say *we* are -- followers of Jesus Christ. When we are fully faithful to that, then the Good News that Paul is talking about will break forth in ever greater clarity. God's love will break forth into our world because we act as the Light of the Nations. We bring the goodness, the love, the care of Jesus into our whole human family as Jesus intended it. All of us are brothers and sisters. Every person on the earth is a son or daughter of God. Among them we try to be a light as Jesus leads us and guides us to bring the fullness of God's love into our world.

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