



THE PASTOR'S PEN

Volume 41, No. 104

January 9, 2013

A History of Epiphany

While many people in the church today have not kept up with what Epiphany is or how it relates to the Christian Year, the truth of the matter is that next to Easter, Epiphany is the probably the oldest season recognized and celebrated in Christendom. It is one of the four major celebrations of the Christian Year along with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. According to the records that we have from the early church, The Festival of the Epiphany has been observed on January 6 as far back as the second century.

Over the course of history, Epiphany has been known by other names. It has been called The Feast of the Manifestation, Feast of Lights, Feast of the Appearing of the Christ, Feast of the Three Kings and The Twelfth Day; this last referring, of course, to the twelve days of Christmas. The name *Epiphany* also has several meanings. It can be interpreted as "to reveal," or "to make known." One way to translate the term is with the word "manifestation." In using this last definition, there are a number of ways that we can apply the message of Epiphany into what the Church believes and teaches about Jesus. One of these teachings is that just as the light manifests itself in the darkness, God revealed or manifested Himself in Jesus, so that the glory of God is seen in Jesus and made known to the world.

The color of Epiphany, that is the color used in the paraments and decorations of the church to denote the mood and meaning of the season, varies between White and Green. White is used for Epiphany Day, The Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after Epiphany) and Transfiguration Sunday (the last Sunday of Epiphany) because these are days of celebration. For the Church, white symbolizes and expresses light, glory, victory and celebration. Green is used on the other Sundays because green is the color of growth. During Epiphany, we are expected to be growing into a fuller realization of the nature of Christ as the Son of God. Also, Sunday after Sunday, as we move through the Christian year, there is growth in the biblical message of God revealing His glory in Jesus and of Jesus revealing that He is the Messiah to all of humanity.

Originally, and before a separate date for Christmas was established by a church council in the fourth century, Epiphany was the time each year that the early church celebrated both the birth and the baptism of Jesus in their

annual observances. Today the Orthodox and Eastern Rite congregations of Christendom continue to celebrate Epiphany in terms of the baptism of Jesus (with some still celebrating His birth on this day as well) while the Western church associates Epiphany with the visit of the Magi. For the East, the baptism of Jesus was a much more important issue due to the Gnostic heresy that claimed that only at His baptism did Jesus become the Son of God. While this was and still is a concern for the Church today, those of us who follow the Western Traditions of the Church deal with this doctrine more directly in our daily teachings and preaching, as opposed to having a time of special emphasis for this matter. Therefore, to keep the timeline of Christ's life in order as we move through the Christian Year, we have chosen to associate Epiphany with the visit of the Magi. This makes good sense to us since the visit of the Magi is a very important event in the life of Christ, and we know that they did not get to Bethlehem until two years after Jesus' birth. By that time, Matthew tells us that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were in a house rather than in a stable.

So why is the Season of Epiphany important to the Church? First of all, it is important because it is a time of worship. Epiphany is a season of worship dealing with the glory of God manifested in Jesus. The season begins with the Magi coming to worship the newborn king. The season ends with the worship experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. When people see Jesus as God's Son, they instinctively fall down to worship him as Lord. Secondly, it is a time to witness. Epiphany is the season of light, and the function of light is to illuminate, to show and to reveal so that all might see. What are they seeing at Epiphany? They are seeing the truth and the way to God as revealed in the person and the teaching of Jesus Christ. Epiphany is a time for emphasis upon evangelism, the telling of the good news, the spreading of the light of Christ in a dark world. Christ is the light and, as Christians, we are to reflect that light in a world darkened by sin. Thirdly, it is a time of work. Christ is the Epiphany of God to all creation. This is one of the main teachings of the season and it is demonstrated by the coming of the Gentile Magi to worship Jesus as Lord. The light of Christ shines with its revelation to the ends of the earth. Jesus is the light to the Gentiles. The light of Christ does not exist to only shine on Christians. It exists to reveal through us that the salvation of humankind is available to all, to reveal the love and nature of God to the world and to show God's involvement with all creation. During this season the church places special emphasis upon the cause of world missions and Epiphany is one of the greatest outreach times of the church. However, it is up to us to carry out the task of working and making these teachings known to others.

Now you know why Epiphany is such an important part of the Christian Year. Now you know why we celebrate it. Most importantly, now you have a good idea what is expected of you as a disciple of Jesus Christ because it has been "revealed" to you and you have received a personal epiphany this year. Make use of this special time by going out of your way to share the light of Christ to others and invite them to worship with you this season. Be a reflection of The Light today and all the rest of the days of the Christian Year.

Celebrating the revelation of Christ with you,

James