

JANUARY 5, 2014; EPIPHANY Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians
3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

There's a good reason the story of the magi's unexpected visit to Bethlehem is told only in Matthew's gospel. He's the one evangelist who writes for Jewish Christians, the one evangelist whose community had problems with non-Jews becoming Christians.

Though there were three basic changes in the first 100 years of Christianity, the one which created the most practical problems for followers of Jesus revolved around the Gentile/Jew question. Is it essential for imitators of Jesus to be Jewish? Or can non-Jews also become other Christs?

Paul of Tarsus had concluded at least 20 years before Matthew wrote that since we follow the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus, Gentiles and Jews are on the same level when it comes to Christian faith. He clearly stated in Galatians 3 that the risen Christ isn't a slave or free person, Jew or Gentile, male or female. Once risen from the dead, Jesus is, in Paul's words, a "new creation."

Yet it's clear that Matthew's Jewish Christian community still had reservations about Gentiles entering the church without first converting to Judaism. Unlike themselves, these "Johnnies-come-lately" weren't obligated to keep the 613 Laws of Moses; regulations to which not only they, but also the historical Jesus adhered.

His community's hesitation in welcoming Gentiles as full-fledged imitators of Jesus seems to be one of the reasons Matthew includes the visit of the magi in his Infancy Narrative. We not only hear about non-Jews discovering and worshiping Jesus, but they're non-Jews engaged in an occupation totally forbidden in the Hebrew Scriptures: astrology. Those who "followed stars" were subject to the death penalty.

The evangelist can't help but remind his original Jewish readers that Herod's Jewish Scripture experts knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born, but he and they were obviously too busy to travel the few miles to Bethlehem and venerate him. Sinful Gentiles did what many law-abiding Jews refused to do.

Matthew was simply joining with the Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians and asking his church to also rejoice that God had "... revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Both sacred authors presume God's revelation isn't something static: given in its entirety once upon a time, never changing, never evolving. As the Ephesians author puts it, "(This mystery) was not made known to people in other generations." There's always deeper dimensions of God's revelation for us to discover.

Five hundred years before Jesus' birth, Third-Isaiah is also convinced of the evolutionary process of God's revelation. Like his prophetic predecessors, he constantly tries to take his people beyond their comfort zone. Long before Paul's mind-expanding insights about the implications of the risen Jesus' new personality, this post-exilic prophet also looks forward to a day when Gentiles will benefit from the faith of Jews. "Nations (Gentiles) shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance." He's certain the faith of his people will eventually affect the faith of all people.

One last point: the gold and incense the magi give to the child make sense when you're dealing with royalty. On the other hand, myrrh is normally used to anoint dead bodies. Even at Jesus' birth, Matthew insists on bringing up his death; a death all his followers are expected to imitate. One way in which we certainly die with him is constantly to see and accept the new in God's revelation, especially at the point in which we've just become comfortable with the old in that revelation.

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JANUARY 12, 2014: BAPTISM OF JESUS
Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 3:13-17

Though it certainly created problems for the gospel churches, the first three evangelists still insisted on narrating an account of Jesus' baptism.

The reason for the problem revolved around the fact that many followers of John the Baptizer never accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They insisted John, not Jesus, had fulfilled the role of the long-anticipated savior of Judaism. (This belief didn't end during the period of the gospels. Historians remind us that some fourth century Jewish communities still had members who continued to believe in John as the Christ.) Since a superior normally baptizes an inferior, these devotees of John insisted that Jesus' baptism proved their point. Their mentor was superior to the Galilean carpenter who had once been one of John's disciples.

Yet in spite of the confusion, Jesus' earliest followers couldn't overlook his baptism. Because of what John's baptism signified, they presumed it was a life-changing event for him. As a member of the Dead Sea scrolls community, John employed baptism as an outward sign of people's determination to carry out Yahweh's will in their lives. The Essenes and others, like Jesus, who submitted to this ritual washing were declaring their openness to whatever God was asking of them.

Looking at the unique aspects of today's gospel pericope, Matthew seems to have created the "give and take" between Jesus and John over who should be baptizing whom simply as a way to get around the superior/inferior issue. But he also changes Mark's original narrative in another significant way. Instead of the heavenly voice proclaiming, "You are my beloved son!" Matthew's voice states, "This is my beloved son!" What formally was regarded as an annunciation to Jesus about his divinity is now looked upon as an annunciation to his followers; a small but very important change.

Many Christologists - those who study the person of Jesus - believe the historical Jesus only became aware of who he actually was when he made the life-changing decision to give himself completely over to God's will in his life. No wonder that event couldn't be left out of most gospels.

Luke even refers to it in Peter's well-known Acts of the Apostles "kerygma." He reminds the Gentile Cornelius, "You know the word that (God) sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power." Things always change when God's the center of one's life.

In the same way, everything also changed for Deutero-Isaiah, as we hear in today's first reading. Though he's convinced he's Yahweh's prophet, he's just as convinced he's a prophet unlike most of his predecessors. He's not going to cry out or shout, not even going to make his voice heard in the street. He'll deliver an extremely low key message, never resorting to anything which will squelch or break his people.

Our sacred authors are convinced that whenever one commits oneself completely to God one always discovers unique dimensions of his or her personality. Though in the giving process we all become disciples of God or the risen Jesus, no two disciples are exactly alike. Each lives his or her commitment in ways completely different from all others. Each sees roads to travel down which others don't notice.

The sacramental way to show our adult commitment to God and Jesus is by receiving from the Eucharistic cup. As we hear in I Corinthians 11, it's the outward sign Jesus instituted for us to show we're going to carry on his ministry - one of the ways we discover who we really are and what God uniquely expects of us.

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