

The Mystery of Epiphany

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 60:1-6
<i>Response</i>	Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 2:1-12

Every year on the feast of Epiphany, the Church celebrates the appearance, the revelation, the unveiling of Jesus' Messianic identity, His Messianic kingship and glory, to the figure of the Magi, the Wise Men from the East...the great revelation of His Messiahship not just to Israelites (like the shepherds) but to the Gentiles (to the Magi). And so for the second reading for this feast day, the Church picks a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians that actually deals with what he calls the mystery of Christ's revelation to the nations. So let's read from Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6, and then we'll try to unpack it and see why the Church chooses this for Epiphany and what St. Paul means in his words to the Ephesians. So this is the reading for today:

..you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

Then it skips down to verse 5.

[It] was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is,

how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.¹

That's Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6. Okay, so what's going on here? Well, if you focus on that terminology of mystery, you can really get at the heart of why the Church chooses this passage from Ephesians for this feast day.

The Greek word for mystery—this one's easy—is *mystērion*. And it means “something hidden” that is unveiled or revealed. So when we think of a mystery, especially in contemporary English-speaking circles, we might think of a mystery novel or a mystery movie. And what we usually will have in a mystery novel is there's some crime committed, and the identity of the person who committed the crime is hidden until the end. And the delight in the mystery movie or a mystery novel is that at the end of the novel, the secret of the identity of the person is revealed.

And that really is a nice way of encapsulating *mystērion*. It's some hidden reality that is then unveiled or revealed so that all can see it. Well here, Paul uses this terminology of *mystērion* in the letter to the Ephesians, and it's one of the central themes in the letter to the Ephesians. In fact, not just a central theme in Ephesians—it's a central theme throughout Paul's letters. In the letters of Paul, the word *mystērion*, mystery, is used 21 times. And it's used 6 times in the letter to the Ephesians, so this is something very central.

So if we want to understand what Paul means when he speaks about the mystery that was made known to him in Ephesians 3, it's actually helpful to back up to the first chapter of Ephesians. In Ephesians 1:9-10—although this verse isn't used in the lectionary, it's still important—it says this:

[God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

So pause there. Notice, Paul begins the letter to the Ephesians by referring to the mystery of God's plan. And what is that mystery? The mystery is His plan to unite all things in Christ. And literally, the Greek word there—*anakephalaiosis*—it's a big word. It literally means to "recapitulate" or to "sum up in the head." *Kephalé* is the head, and the force of the verb means to recap. Like if we say the word "recap," think about how we use the word "cap" in English to describe that something's at the head—like a capital is the head city of a state.

So to recap everything in Christ, to sum everything up in Christ, to unite everything in Christ, things in Heaven and things on Earth...that's the mystery. That's the *mystērion*—God's plan is to unite all of the universe in Christ.

And if we take that term and then we fast-forward back to the reading for today, when Paul speaks about the grace that was given to him, and how the mystery was made known to him by revelation, here the mystery he's speaking about is the mystery of the fact that the Gentiles—the pagans, the non-Israelite peoples of the world—the Greek word here is *ethnē*. We get the term "ethnic" from that, so all the *ethnē*, all the peoples of the world, all the non-Israelites, all the pagans, have now been made partakers of the promise of the Messiah. They've now been made members of the body of the Messiah. They've now been made fellow heirs with the people of Israel to all of the promises of God that are given to us in Christ Jesus.

Now, why is that so important for Paul? Well, you have to read Ephesians, like the other letters of Paul, from a first century Jewish perspective. If you think about salvation history—just think about the Old Testament, think about the Pentateuch and the prophets and the historical books. Throughout that whole period—going all the way back to Abraham, all the way up to the time of Paul—the history of Israel, the history of God's chosen people, is one long story of conflict between the Chosen People and the peoples of the world...between the Chosen People of Israel and the *ethnē*, the Gentiles. Whether it's Abraham being in exile or a stranger among the Canaanite kings of the land, or whether it's the Israelites in slavery in

servitude to the Egyptians, or whether it's the twelve tribes living in the land, who were oppressed by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and then the Persians and then the Greeks and then the Romans.

The whole history of Israel has been one of division with the nations of the world. It's been one of conflict with the pagan peoples of the world. If you're an Israelite, if you're a Jew living in the first century, and you look around you at the pagan world, what you see is polytheism, idolatry, human sacrifice, cannibalism, sexual immorality, the worship of beasts (of birds of the air and beasts of the field), the worship of all kinds of false gods and false goddesses. In other words, the pagan world is like a living icon of the division of humanity that you see and trace all the way back to the tower of Babel in the time of Abraham.

And it seems like an impediment that could never possibly be overcome. The idea that the faith of Israel in the one God, the one creator God, would somehow triumph and spread throughout the whole world—it seems impossible if you're a Jew living in the Babylonian Exile or the Assyrian Exile or under the Persian Empire, or much less under the Roman Empire in the time of Paul. And yet...and yet...if you, like St. Paul, are a Jew who knows the prophets of the Old Testament and you go all the way back to the prophet Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel—if you read through the prophets, one of the things you'll see is this theme starts to emerge, especially in the book of the prophet Isaiah, that one day the *ethnē*, the nations of the world, will see the light...that light will dawn upon them, and they will turn from their idols and they will begin to worship the one God of Israel. And that they'll listen to the law that's going to go forth from Jerusalem.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is the book of Isaiah...Isaiah 66. I'll just read one passage. Again, this isn't in the lectionary for today, but it might be the most famous example of what we might call “a prophecy of the conversion of the gentiles”...a prophecy of the conversion of the nations. So if you think about it, Isaiah is one of the most famous books of the Old Testament.

For example, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the late 1940s, one of the only complete scrolls that we have, one of the first to be discovered, was the great Isaiah scroll—this massive 35-foot scroll (it might be 30-foot, I can't

remember the exact measurements)—but it’s a long scroll containing all 66 chapters of Isaiah. And at the very end of this sacred scroll of one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, this is what we read in Isaiah 66:18 and following:

...I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations...

...and the Hebrew word there is *goyim*. It means the Gentiles.

...all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations...

There it is again, the Gentiles.

...to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. And they...

...meaning the nations...

...shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their cereal offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

Now, it’s hard for me to capture in words just how shocking that prophecy of Isaiah is, because he’s not just describing the conversion of the Gentiles or the subjugation of the Gentiles—like Israel will conquer the pagans and they will lord it over them. He’s describing there that the Gentiles will not just turn to the one God of Israel. They’ll see His glory, but He will take some of them to be priests and Levites. The idea that pagans would one day become priests of the one God of Israel is almost inconceivable...but that’s how the book of Isaiah ends.

Alright, so again, if you're a first century Jew, and you're living under the Roman occupation, you know from Scripture that one day the Gentiles are going to turn to the Lord. But to see it actually happen, to see that take place, would be something that would be almost inconceivable. And it's really...it seems like it would be impossible given the current political climate, the current religious climate and all that.

And yet, what happens? Saul of Tarsus, this devout Pharisee, has an encounter with the risen Jesus in which he is called by Jesus through a revelation, as it says here in Ephesians, an *apocalypsis*—an unveiling of the risen Christ—to become the apostle to the *ethnē*, the apostle to the Gentiles, the one who's going to bring the Good News of the fact that salvation has now come not just to Israel, but to every nation in the world...and that Israel and the Gentiles will now be united in one church, the Church of Christ Jesus, the Church of the Messiah.

That is the mystery, which for centuries has been hidden. It just wasn't visible. It didn't seem like it was even possible. But now through the coming of Jesus, it has been made known. It has been revealed. It has been unveiled. It has been unseen. And so Paul—in the letter to the Ephesians here—is talking about the revelation that Christ has given to him, that now the Gentiles are co-heirs with Israelites to all the promises of God.

The Church, on this feast of Epiphany, celebrates one of the first manifestations of that, and it's the coming of the Wise Men to the child Jesus in Bethlehem...because these Wise Men represent the wise among the pagans. In fact, the pagans are going to begin to turn and to see the light that the baby Jesus brings into the world, that the Christ Child brings into the world.

And so I'll close here with a quote from the living tradition. This is something most Christians in our day—we just take it for granted. Well, of course there are billions of people throughout the world from every continent on the Earth and from every country on the Earth who worshipped Jesus of Nazareth...and with Him, the one God of Israel. But in the first century, that was something that was almost

inconceivable. I mean, yes, the prophets said it, but it's one thing to have a prophecy. It's another thing to see the prophecy fulfilled.

But what happens? Jesus of Nazareth comes into the world, begins to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, is crucified, dies, is buried, and on the third day rises again. And He chooses the twelve apostles and sends them out to the four corners of the Earth to go and baptize the nations of the world, teaching them everything He had commanded them. And so what happens? These twelve guys go out to the world—and Paul gets added to the mix too—and they start preaching the Good News of repentance and salvation for the nations. And one by one, city after city, temple after temple, the pagans put down their idols, and they do exactly what Isaiah said. They turn to the one God of Israel and stop worshipping the creatures of the world and worshipping false gods and false goddesses...and worship the Creator and His Son, Jesus Christ.

And so in the early centuries of the Church, the conversion of the pagans was one of the motives of credibility for believing that Jesus of Nazareth wasn't just one more guy claiming to be someone. He wasn't just one more self-proclaimed prophet or one more self-proclaimed messiah. But unlike other figures who rose up in the first century and claimed to be the prophet or the new Moses—unlike these other ones, Jesus actually brought the prophecies to fulfillment. Because when was it that the pagans of the world began to put aside their idols and begin to worship the one God of Israel? It was after the death and the resurrection and the commissioning of the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth.

So I'll end with a quote from Eusebius of Caesarea. This is from the fourth century AD. Eusebius was one of the Church Fathers. And in the fourth century, Christians could still point to the conversion of the pagans as a miracle, as something that was inexplicable apart from Christianity being a divinely revealed religion—a mystery, a supernatural mystery, something that you can't explain apart from God's divine intervention. And this is what he says:

Behold how today, yes, in our own times, our eyes see not only Egyptians, but every race of men who used to be idolaters... released from the errors of polytheism and the demons, and calling on the God of the prophets!...

Yes, in our own time the knowledge of the Omnipotent God shines forth and sets a seal of certainty on the forecasts of the prophets. You see this actually going on, you no longer only expect to hear of it, and if you ask the moment when the change began, for all your inquiry you will receive no other answer but the moment of the appearance of the Savior...²

That's from Eusebius' *Proof of the Gospel*, book 1, section 6, verses 20 and following.

So that's what we celebrate today, the Epiphany—in Greek, the appearance—of the Savior of the world, which began not just the conversion of the world, but this is also important, the collapse of the divisions between different human nations. If you think about all of the division within the world, all of the conflict in the world...what's the solution to that conflict? The solution to that is the Epiphany of Jesus Christ—as Paul says, the mystery of the fact that all nations have been made co-heirs to the promises of God in Christ Jesus, who is the only person who can ever unite the peoples of the world.

² Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 1.6.20-21