

Sermon: into the world
Epiphany 2014, Ephesians 3:1-13
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On Monday, the Copts celebrate Christmas; our western Christian calendar says 'Epiphany' on that day. Epiphany is closely related to Christmas - it is the feast that focusses on how Jesus Christ has become known to the world.

The church often reads the story of the Magi from the east who came to worship Jesus, because it is about Jesus being made known as the Son of God for the whole world. Epiphany is therefore often celebrated as a feast of mission.

The worship of the magi

Mission is not just a thing of the New Testament, and of the church. Mission was also God's goal for Israel in the Old Testament. No wonder, because mission is grounded in the character of God. He loves all people, and his work in this world always includes his reaching out in love to humankind.

From Isaiah we have heard that the glory of the Lord rises upon Israel, and then 'the nations shall come to your light, kings to the brightness of your rising' (Isa 60:3) and 'the wealth of the nations shall come to you... all those from Sheba shall come [and] bring gold and frankincense and shall bring good news.' (Isa 60:6).

In Psalm 72 we have read of the king, the royal son of God, and 'may the kings of Sheba [...] bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him.' (Ps 72:11)

When the wise men from the east came to Jesus, Matthew was careful to underline that we see here a fulfilment of prophecy; the kings brought gold and frankincense and they fell down before Jesus to worship him.

From the beginning of their religious history, the nation of Israel knew that their God was a God for the whole world. Think of Abraham - he was called by God to be a blessing for the world.

How would this happen? In the minds of Judaism in the days of Jesus, God would indeed bless the nations, bless the non-Jews - but only if they would become part of Israel and adopts the core religious rites: they would need to be circumcised and they would have to follow the food laws of Israel. So really, salvation was in giving up your own culture and your nationality.

Mathew was a radical when he described the worship of Jesus by the magi - because they did not qualify. 'Do you not see, Mathew, how can they worship him? They must first become as we are, then God can be satisfied.' But Mathew rejected these preconditions.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people, just as they are. God sent a star to draw the magi to Jesus and to guide them on their way; God gave them great joy; he gave them the blessing of seeing Jesus and Mary his mother; God accepted their worship and their gifts.

'Careful Jesus, careful Mary, these gifts are touched by foreigners. Careful, how can you accept their worship, do they understand what they are doing? Stop them, they cannot worship God except if they first accept all of our habits and rites, and if they change culture...'

God laughs about this pettiness. From the very first moment when Jesus was born, it was God himself who made clear that for him, no man is unclean, no person is wrong, no-one is beyond the pale. The first people to worship Him were stinking shepherds and unclean foreigners. And God was pleased. That is so encouraging for us! What a richness for us - we can come as we are.

The mystery of Christ

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote about the 'unsearchable riches of Christ'. Unsearchable means: impossible to find by our own means. But when we meet with Jesus Christ - even though His greatness is really beyond description, we worship like the shepherds and the magi.

We did not find Him - he found us, just as it was God who drew the shepherds and the magi to Jesus.

When the Magi asked Mary, 'ah can we hold your baby in our arms', they did not understand that the same baby in their arms was actually the one who created them... Too much to comprehend! He was the one who guided the star... He sent his angels. He brought the magi to their knees at the cradle.

By being connected with this Christmas child, who is the ruler of the universe, we are changed from spiritual paupers to wealthy children of God. God becomes our Father when we are connected by faith with his true and only Son.

St Paul writes in Eph 3:12 that thanks to Jesus we have boldness and confidence to access God. Boldness with God: The Greek word for boldness used by Paul means 'free speech'. Christ puts us in this freedom. In relationship to God, we have the right to speak freely. He is not a scary dictator for us, but our loving Father. In Egypt we may have to be careful with our words, but with God, we can be frank.

And we have confidence to access God. If you want to go to him, to talk with him, the door is always open. A great thought for this new year. God's door is always open. He is your Father; you can sit with Him at his kitchen table and discuss whatever you feel, or think, whatever you have done, or would like to do. Free access, and free speech. What a treasure.

Paul writes about free access to God, and the right to free speech while he was in prison, in Rome probably. His crime? He had been accused by the Jewish leaders of bringing a non-Jewish man into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, and of speaking against the laws of Moses.

So he was in prison for the issue of access to the temple, to God, and for the right to express what he believed. But even in prison, he celebrated that he was free: heaven is open, and nothing of what we think or say is off limits for God. We can empty our hearts for him anywhere and at any time.

The accusations against Paul touch the heart of his message. Is God only accessible for people who have become Jewish first by being circumcised and by following all the laws of Moses?

Paul speaks in this context of the mystery of Christ. The Old Testament prophets spoke of God's saving acts for the nations; What the prophets did not foresee was how God would bring this salvation about; it spoke of a Messiah, yes, but these prophets did so in rather nationalistic terms, as if this Messiah would be a political leader who would be able to make the nations submit to Israel.

The mystery Paul speaks about is that Jesus Christ creates one body of believers out of very different people - from Jews and gentiles. And Paul is very explicit; the coming of Jesus Christ was to create one new people, one body of believers, one united worshipful community of those who follow Jesus Christ.

Whether you are born as a Jew, or as a gentile, whatever your background, whatever your culture, whatever you have done, in spite of all your dark sides - there is no difference. We all have free access to God and as his children we form one undivided community.

This is good news! For people from all nations, Egyptian, American, or Dutch, or Canadian or people from Zimbabwe or Nigeria, there is no need to behave as a Jew in order for God to accept us. There is in fact no need to accept anyone's culture before we are acceptable for God. We do not even have to live by the subcultures of our own churches.

One church, one mission

The unity of Jews and gentiles as one new people is not just an alliance, or a friendly cooperation, or a partnership, but it is total fusion. Together we form a perfect spiritual union, a new humanity.

For the Jews, even for those who followed Jesus Christ, this was hard to swallow. They had grown up believing that the "Others" were acceptable only if they first became just as the Jews, and that the Jews in any case, had some extra brownie points with God.

But Paul makes very explicit, for Jews and gentiles who worship Jesus, for shepherds and magi, there is the same legacy, the same life, the same light. There is no difference, God is the same for all.

But be careful - just as God never asked the gentiles to adopt the Jewish national laws and habits, so he also never asked the Jews to give up their Jewishness.

Love God, and love neighbour is our common law in the new people of God - but the fact that we are one new people of God through Jesus Christ, does not mean we have to give up on our uniqueness. Canadians can be Canadians, and if you are from Zimbabwe, live as people from Zimbabwe do. But with love for God and for each other.

But be warned, all these differences must not create division in the one house of God; in the house of God, we are all his children - irrespective of our backgrounds. And as his children, united around Jesus Christ, we want to live in peace and love, so we avoid doing things that may be perfectly fine in our own culture, but that may be a stumbling block for others.

So Paul makes very clear in some of his letters - Jewish followers, it is great to follow all your Jewish cultural habits. But do not let them distance you from the others. For instance, feel free to eat with non-Jews, and eat what they give you. Allow nothing to damage the relationship within the one family of God.

This is good news for the world. We can be unique, special, each nation, each person can be unique. But this is not at the expense of being truly one and united. The church of God is the most diverse people in the world. We come from over 200 nations, with our unique characteristics, and at the same time, we are able to be united in love for God and for each other. This is what our old worn out world needs. Diversity does not need to lead to hatred and war; it can be celebrated, if at the heart of our existence, we follow Jesus Christ and we love God and each other.

Conclusion

And the church is called to be God's herald; with the angels we proclaim peace on earth for those who follow Jesus Christ. We do not fight over differences in lifestyle, of culture, the length of our skirts or whether women should wear gloves or have long hair... who cares about all this!

We worship Jesus Christ who gave us together free access to God, free speech, and freedom to be who we are. His rule is love for God and love for all men and women.

Our church here is called by God, you personally are called by God, to present this mystery of Jesus Christ in the midst of our land. This means that as church and as individuals, we can never keep people away from us, we can never keep people outside the doors, because they are different.

And as soon as they are inside the door, they do not have to become just as we are. God respects all people as unique beings, and that is what we should also do. May 2014 be a year of mission for us - a year of worship for Jesus, love for God, and love for all people.