

Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany, January 10, 2010 “The Other Wise Man”

by The Rev. Alan R. Crippen II

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9; Ps. 89: 20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Let us pray:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Introduction

Recently *World* magazine did a feature profile on one of my favorite Anglican theologians, J.I. Packer. Packer, as many of you know, is a prolific author. He’s written dozens of books including the best-selling book *Knowing God*, a spiritual classic with over 2,000,000 copies in print. A defender of biblical orthodoxy, he too has been defrocked by the liberal and revisionist Anglican Church of Canada. Now as he approaches his mid-eighties Packer has become something of a sage prophet-priest-professor for those of us seeking to find our way amid the worldwide Anglican realignment and renewal movement. As I read this article, I was particularly struck by Packer’s advice to priests in a sidebar. He said that the priest’s three top priorities ought to be: teach, teach, and teach.¹ Perhaps if more priests had been faithful in expositing Holy Scripture in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, those bodies would not be in the mess in which they find themselves today. But for all of us at St. George’s this is now history, a story that awaits future historians to figure out what happened to the Episcopal Church and why.

In the meantime those of us clergymen in Convocation of Anglicans in North America and in the recently formed Anglican Church in North America have a job to do. And in that task Packer’s counsel is good: teach, teach, and teach. So, in the spirit of Packer’s exhortation for priests to teach I thought that I should give you a pop-quiz this morning. Don’t worry, it’s only two multiple choice questions, and you won’t have to hand it in for a grade. Perhaps we’ll do that another day. Are you ready to begin? Here we go...

Question One: Where in the Bible is the account of the wise men?

- A. The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke
- B. The Gospel of John
- C. The Gospel of Matthew
- D. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke

The answer is: C, the Gospel of Matthew

Question Two: According to the Bible, how many wise men visited the infant Christ?

- A. Two
- B. Three

¹ Warren Cole Smith, “Patriarch,” *World*, December 05, 2009, Vol. 24, No. 24

- C. Twelve
- D. The Bible doesn't give a number

The answer is: D, The Bible doesn't give a number

This may come as a surprise to you, especially if you enjoy the hymn “We Three Kings.” But it's true; the Bible does not say there were three kings. Yet the tradition of the three kings or wise men is deeply embedded in the Western Christian tradition. It is conjectured that there were three wise men each one corresponding to the itemized gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Eastern Christian tradition, however, the number of wise men varies from two to twelve. And if this is a troubling fact, also consider that most scholars believe that by the time the wise men reached the infant Jesus, he would have been two years old. Does this mean that all those Christmas crèches are wrong? Matthew's account puts Jesus, Mary and Joseph in a house in Bethlehem by the time the wise men arrive. A two-year old Jesus? Now, think about it, Mary is probably the only mother in world history who never experienced the “terrible twos.”

This morning I would like to propose that there is yet another wise man in Holy Scripture. However, unlike the *magi* or wise men of Matthew's Gospel, the other wise man is from the West. And unlike the *magi* of the Gospel story who were most probably astrologers, the other wise man was soldier. Furthermore, unlike the *magi* who worshipped the infant/toddler Jesus, this wise man never saw Jesus physically, but rather he saw him metaphysically through the eyes of faith sometime after Jesus' death and resurrection. And yet like the *magi*, this other wise man was a gentile. In fact, he was the first gentile to become a Christian. I am referring to Cornelius of Acts, chapter 10.

Today marks the first Sunday after Epiphany. What is Epiphany and why is always commemorated by the story of the wise men from the east? Epiphany means: “manifestation.” But what manifestation are we commemorating with this particular feast? Answer: It is the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles (i.e., those who are not of the Jewish religion), and thus to the whole world. The meaning of the Epiphany is that “there's a wideness in God's mercy,” insofar as Jesus came to save not only the Jewish people from their sins but everyone in the whole world who would call upon his name. Furthermore, Jesus is not simply the King of the Jews, but rather he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is symbolically demonstrated by the traditional three kings (gentiles all) who worship at the feet of the infant-toddler Jesus. The wise men/kings who followed the star and worshipped the child Jesus are the prolepsis, the anticipation if you will, of the whole world worshipping King Jesus.

Historical Background

So it happens that on the first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany our scripture lesson is about Cornelius' conversion. Cornelius was the “first fruits” of the gentiles who would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He was a Roman centurion, a military officer roughly equivalent in today's rank to an infantry captain. Stationed in Caesarea, just 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Cornelius lived in a port city and the Imperial administrative center for the Roman rule of Palestine. As a professional soldier he was part

of the Italian Cohort, a battalion-sized unit dedicated to respond to civil unrest and other kinds of disturbances that required military intervention. Caesarea was not a bad duty station for an Italian soldier. Situated on the Mediterranean Sea it boasted of many beautiful public buildings including procurator's palace (home of the infamous Pontus Pilate), as well as other palaces and an amphitheater. Its port was the finest harbor in Palestine. At Caesarea Cornelius was able to maintain a comfortable home that accommodated his family, servants, friends and comrade soldiers, and later a church.

The Text

Acts, chapter 10 tells the whole story and I encourage you to read it later today in your brand new *Reformation Study Bible* (English Standard Version) that I hope each of you received from Santa Clause on Christmas. The text says that the gentile Cornelius was a "devout man who feared God." (Acts 10:2) This does not mean that he was a Christian, nor does it mean that he was a Jew. What it does mean is that Cornelius was knowledgeable of Judaism and had embraced its monotheism and ethical teachings. He was a pious and upright man who led his family in many Jewish observances and customs without taking the initiation rite of circumcision to become a proselyte or convert to Judaism.

The story of Acts 10 may be summarized as follows: In this chapter there are two unusual visions from God, three unsolicited visitors from Cornelius, an unprecedented visit by the Apostle Peter, and a divine visitation of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household that resulted in a regenerating spirit-filled conversion experience that changed their lives, and not only theirs but the course of Christian history from that moment forward. Indeed the events of Acts 10 represent in part the fulfillment of biblical prophecy of the promised Redeemer that we read about in Isaiah 42 as well as in Psalm 89.

Cornelius received the first vision. It was the vision of an angel who appeared to him and informed him that God had heard his prayers and that he was to send messengers to Joppa and bring Peter to him. Early the next day Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier 30 miles south by foot to get Peter.

At around lunch time a day or so later and shortly before the unexpected visitors arrived in Joppa, Peter went up to the rooftop to pray. Hungry, he fell into a trance and had an unusual vision of all kinds of animals being lowered from heaven in a sheet. There was a voice that said: "Rise Peter; kill, and eat." (Acts 10:13) A good Jew who ate only kosher food, he protested, but the voice said, "What God has made clean, do not call common." (Acts 10:15) This vision reoccurred three times. Peter was confused by the meaning of the vision. Just as he began to ponder the meaning Cornelius' messengers arrived at the house asking for him. Then the Holy Spirit supernaturally revealed to Peter that God had sent these men and that Peter was to go with them to Caesarea without hesitation.

Peter greeted the three gentiles and they delivered Cornelius' message. After a night's rest Peter, six associates, and the three messengers departed for Caesarea to meet with Cornelius as directed by the Holy Spirit. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, Cornelius fell down at Peter's feet to worship him, but Peter corrected him, saying, "Stand up, I too am a man." (Acts 10:26) Sometime in the intervening hours between his vision and his

arrival at Cornelius' home, Peter had his own epiphany. Peter had experienced an intuitive insight into the essential meaning of his vision. It was that the kingdom of God was to be opened to the gentiles. To the man to whom Jesus had entrusted the keys of the kingdom of God, Peter would now use those keys to open the door of salvation to the gentiles. They would have direct access to God's kingdom by personal faith in Jesus Christ.

With this spiritual knowledge Peter broke the Jewish taboo of not associating with gentiles and entered Cornelius' house. This was a scandal in the Jewish community, but nevertheless, it was done at God's supernatural direction. After all, didn't the prophet Isaiah describe the "coastlands" as waiting for God's law? (Isaiah 42:4) Didn't he herald the "coastlands" to listen and pay attention? (Isaiah 49:1) What Peter found in this coastal home was a ready-made congregation of gentiles who were eager to hear what God wanted for them in their lives. This was the perfect platform for preacher Peter who was ready to tell the Gospel story as related in our scripture lesson this morning. (Acts 10:34-38) Indeed, Peter relayed to his hearers that God does not show favoritism to any nation or people. Isaiah's words about the coming Servant were true. Jesus is the light for the nations, that salvation may reach the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6) And so, Peter told the story of Jesus to the other wise man – Cornelius – who had longed to hear it. He believed and so did his family and friends in attendance. And then the Holy Spirit descended immediately upon them and they were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues extolling God. (Acts 10:46)

Now you can probably imagine that Peter and his six Jewish-Christian colleagues from Joppa were a bit shook up by this manifestation – by this epiphany. This experience was highly irregular. Weren't converts to be baptized before they received the Holy Spirit? Weren't gentiles supposed to become Jews before they became Christians? Obviously, this was not so. God had revealed otherwise. So Peter baptized all present and tarried a few more days to give the new church in Caesarea some instruction in Christian basics.

And now, the rest of the story...

The Meaning and Application

The church in Caesarea grew to become very influence in the ancient world and late antiquity. Indeed, Caesarea would eventually claim the Church's first historian, Eusebius, as one of its early bishops. From this strategically influential port city in Palestine, the Gospel would made its way around the world. In this city, Paul proclaimed Christ to Roman guards, centurions, tribunes, and even the governor. From this city Paul would make his way to Rome, the nexus of the world's highways. From Rome the Gospel made its way to England; from England to Virginia; and from Virginia to Colorado Springs. So with a debt of gratitude to the other wise man – Cornelius – who longed to worship King Jesus like the *magi* of Matthew's Gospel, I ask you this morning where does the Gospel go from here? Where will Christ be manifested next? We are called to be an epiphany people. That is, we are called to make Christ manifest to the world starting in our hearts, then our homes, then our neighborhoods, and so on.

Do you sense the spiritual reality of Christ's manifestation, of Christ's epiphany – right here, right now? This story is not some dry as dust history, but God's living Word to you to be lived out in the story of our lives. Christ for the world we sing. The world to Christ we bring...with loving zeal ...with fervent prayer ... with one accord ... with joyful song.

In the name of God, the Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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