

MANY EPIPHANIES

A Sermon for The Third Sunday after Epiphany, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the several days

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

As you know, I have preferred to preach from the Propers of each Sunday or special Feast Day unless there was something required, such as last Sunday's sermon on abortion, or something so newsworthy or startling that I had learned that I felt I had to tell you about it. This morning there is a mix of these.

The first thing is that yesterday was the anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Roe versus Wade*, the decision that made abortion not just legal, but made it illegal for states to prohibit abortion. One legal commentator I read yesterday said that *Roe v. Wade* is the worst decision the Supreme Court has ever made, Worse even than *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the 1890s, which was the basis for the "separate, but equal" doctrine that allowed for segregated schools. It is because of the date of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, 22 January 1973, that ministers of the REC are required to give a sermon against abortion on a Sunday near this date.

I wish now that I had not given you my anti-abortion sermon last Sunday because of what happened this past week on Wednesday. It was an epiphany of a sort, an appearance, a manifestation, of evil so great that it boggles the mind. If it had happened the week before, it would have been in that sermon. What happened was that in the evening of last Wed., the 19th of January, using warrants based on Grand Jury indictments, Philadelphia police arrested: a West Philadelphia doctor, his wife, and his 8 employees on a variety of charges ranging from first degree murder, third degree murder, conspiracy, tampering with records, theft by deception, racketeering, and perjury among other things. The story hit the AP newswire on the 20th, but many of the details were hushed up or glossed over for two reasons: first or all because 95% or more of the mainstream media are pro abortion, and this story shows the problems of legal abortion in the worst possible light. Secondly, the details of the story are so horrible that no one really wants to read them or hear about them. I won't go into them.

Here is the story, as sanitized as I can make it. In 1979, a medical doctor named Kermit Gosnell in Philadelphia applied to the Pennsylvania Dept of Health for approval to do abortions in his clinic. That approval was granted, and a one-year license was issued, Although the license expired in 1980, inspectors did **not** visit the clinic again until 1989. Even in the face of numerous deficiencies the clinic was relicensed. The next inspection Gosnell's clinic received was in 1993, which was the last inspection for another 17 years.

The problem was not just the laxity of the Health Dept. inspectors, who were very lenient on all abortion clinics because of some political decisions; the conditions in the clinic were very unsanitary; there was no licensed OB-Gynecologist on premises, and there were no licensed nurses. None of that really mattered because Dr. Gosnell was performing extremely late-term, illegal abortions. He was inducing labor, and then killing the babies after they were born.

In a 281 Grand Jury report, he was indicted on 39 charges, which include 8 counts of first degree murder, and one count of third-degree murder for the death by negligence of a woman patient.

I shall not go into any further detail. Suffice to say that this cold-blooded killer is now in jail, and he was denied the possibility of bail. At least four of his employees were also charged with murder in this epiphany of evil. We know God will have mercy on his victims; but it is one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith that we should pray that Dr. Gosnell and the other defendants will repent and that God will have mercy on them. In the case of a serial child killer such as Gosnell, that is one of the hardest things that God calls us to do. We can only hope that the revelation of the many horrendous crimes perpetrated in his clinic will hasten the end of the abomination of abortion in our land.

Now that that awfulness is out of the way, let us look at some epiphanies of good. The last two Sundays, I gave you sermons that did not match the assigned Bible readings. That happened because I had not been able to give you a real Epiphany sermon until two Sundays ago when I just did it because I felt it was needed. Last Sunday, the readings were ignored again because of the necessity to give that abortion sermon. So here we are on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, having heard three sets of Bible readings (that includes today's), with as yet not a comment on any of them. That's going to change, right now!

You have often heard me speak of Fred H. Lindemann, the Lutheran theologian, who wrote a set of four books titled, *The Sermon and the Propers*, that were published in 1958 on how the Propers for a day relate to what that day is called on the Christian calendar and how a sermon on that day ought to relate to the Propers.

On Friday, Father Marvin gave me a copy of a book titled, *The Harmony of the Collects, Epistles, and Gospels*, which was written by a priest of the Church of England named Melville Scott. The Rev, Dr. Scott was Archdeacon of Stafford and Vicar of Castlechurch, Stafford from 1894 to 1924. His book was published in 1903 and may have inspired Lindemann. Scott's book is based on the 1662 PB and is as Anglican as Lindemann's book is Lutheran. I mention this because both Scott and Lindemann look at the Propers for the Sundays after Epiphany as being days devoted to various epiphanies.

We all know that the Feast of the Epiphany is the celebration of the day that the Gentile wise men from the east came to visit the child Jesus. On that day Jesus was manifested to the Gentiles. What possible epiphanies could come after that?

The answer to that is that there are epiphanies that are manifestations of various attributes of Jesus, which can be seen in some stories about Him.

The Gospel lesson for the First Sunday after the Epiphany is the story of Jesus' staying behind at the temple when he was 12 years old. Most everyone is familiar with that story and of how his mother chided him for doing it and how he responded. As we read in Luke 2:48-51 **and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. 49 And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? know ye not that I must be about my Father's business? 50 And they understood not the saying which he spake**

unto them. 51 And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. This is looked at as the Epiphany of Duty.

Jesus felt he was old enough to be independent and that his duty to God the Father was paramount, but Mary reminded Him of his duty to his human parents. He acknowledged that duty, and was “subject to them.”

On the Second Sunday after Epiphany, our Gospel lesson was St. Mark’s description of the Baptism of Jesus. This is both an ancient and a recent change. In the early days of the church, the Feast of the Epiphany was about Jesus’ Baptism. Then sometime, 500 or more years ago, the Gospel lesson about Jesus’ Baptism was replaced by the story of visit of the Magi, and the Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after Epiphany remained the story about the Wedding at Cana and His first miracle, that of His changing the water into wine. For those churches for which the Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after Epiphany was about the Wedding at Cana, the story of His Baptism became something of an orphan.

The Baptism story was first put back into the PB as a Gospel lesson in the 1928 PB here in America. The REC felt it was “meet and right so to do” because the story of Jesus’ Baptism really needs to be heard before we get to Lent and then Easter. In that Gospel lesson, we read in Mark 1:9-11 9 And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. 10 And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: 11 And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. I hope it is obvious that this is the Epiphany of Jesus as the Son of God, of Jesus as the Messiah. From our perspective, when we read this, we do not have to wait until St. Peter recognizes it in Mark 8:29 29 And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ.

We have the story of the Wedding at Cana as our Gospel for today, and it is called the Epiphany of Sympathy by both Scott and Lindemann. Sympathy does not have do to do only with grief or sorrow. We can be sympathetic with someone who is joyful; we can feel their joy with them. After all, sympathy is “feeling with”. We can feel any feeling *with* somebody else. Jesus felt the joy of the bride and groom, and the dismay the host would feel at running out of wine at the wedding celebration.

Just as today’s Gospel lesson used to be the Gospel lesson for the preceding Sunday, so it is with Next Sunday’s Gospel lesson, which is the story of two miracles: the healing of a leper and the healing of the Centurion’s servant. Those stories are considered by both writers to be the Epiphany of Mercy. As we go through the next three Sundays up through the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, we shall see other Epiphanies.

What we have not looked at yet is how the Epistle lessons connect with these epiphanies. If you look in a Prayer Book on page 110, you will see that the Epistle lesson for the First Sunday after Epiphany is the first 5 verses of the 12th chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. If you look on page 111, you see the Epistle lesson for 2nd Sunday begins at verse 6 of that same chapter. Likewise, the Epistle lesson for today on page 112 begins at the 16th verse of chapter

12. In three Sundays of Epistle lessons we have heard the entire 12th chapter of Romans. Let's see how these lessons relate to the Epiphanies we have identified from the Gospel lessons.

The Epistle lesson for the First Sunday after Epiphany says this:

Romans 12:1-5 KJV Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

St. Paul speaks here of our duty towards God and our duties toward the other members of Christ's church: our duty to present ourselves, our bodies to God as a living sacrifice; our duty not to conform ourselves to this world, but rather to conform ourselves to the will of God. This is certainly a fitting lesson to accompany the Epiphany of Duty as seen in Jesus Christ.

The Epistle lesson for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany follows with this:

Romans 12:6-16 6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. 9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. 10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; 11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; 12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; 13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. 14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. 15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. 16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.

Now, this is the epistle lesson that was paired for centuries with the story of the Wedding at Cana. It overflows with pleas for sympathy of all sorts, and certainly belongs with the Epiphany of Sympathy. It really is sort of out of place with the story of Jesus Baptism and the Epiphany of the Son of God.

Today's Epistle lesson begins at the middle of verse 16 & goes to the end of the chapter. Romans 12:16-21 Be not wise in your own conceits. 17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. 18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Again, because of the insertion of the story of Baptism of Jesus, this lesson does not really square with Gospel lesson of the Wedding at Cana. This lesson always went with the two miracles of healing the leper and the Centurion's servant. St. Paul is speaking of our duty to be merciful, even to our enemies. If we are not wise in our own conceits, we are not so likely to think that we are always right and it is the other guy that is wrong; that will keep arguments and strife from breaking out in the first place. "Giving place to wrath" means simply wait a while for anger to cool down; that will give both sides an opportunity to hear God's still small voice.

Duty, Sympathy, and Mercy are all attributes of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The question is, "How do we measure up on these attributes that Jesus wants us to exhibit just as He does?" As always, the answer is: "Not quite as well as we should."

I was reading about a symposium being held in South Carolina called Mere Anglicanism. The stories that came from it digested some talks and sermons. In one sermon the speaker quoted Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, that the early Christians felt it was **the sacred duty** of each person to share their faith. The speaker then asked, "Why is Christianity struggling and shrinking while Islam is growing?" His answer was, "Because you and I have failed." He continued, "We have become convinced that it is impolite, impolitic, and rude to discuss our faith in public. We have come to believe that our faith is a private matter and is best kept to the self. This is decidedly not how the disciples of the early church felt."

That should not be how we feel either. The last words Jesus spoke on this earth were recorded by St. Matthew: Matthew 28:19-20 **19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.**

This is a duty Christ Himself laid on all Christians – **on us**. A duty that we show sympathy and mercy to all our fellow men by leaving no one who has not heard the message of Christ, that we as Jesus' adopted brothers and sisters manifest Him to the world, that we, everyone of us, must also be an Epiphany of Jesus Christ to the world, even to Pagosa Springs. Let the light of Christ shine forth from you. Don't hide it under a basket. Go ye therefore.... and make Christ's church grow.

AMEN!