

THE LAST EPIPHANY
A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

I'm going to begin this by telling you a few odd facts about the church calendar, facts that would be useful if we had a game called "Church Trivial Pursuit". Those facts will shed some light on some of the rubrics in the Prayer Book, the rubrics being those little patches of fine print that are scattered here and there throughout the PB that tell us what to do at various parts of the services. They are called rubrics because once upon a time they were printed in red. In a few places there are rubrics that tell us what to use for some cases where a Proper Collect, Epistle and Gospel have not been provided. That will shed some light on the order of today's Service.

If someone were to ask you, How many Sundays are there in the Epiphany season?, what would your answer be? If you said, "I don't know. That depends..." you would be close to giving a full and complete answer, because what it depends on is the date of Easter. Easter can come as early as the 22nd of March and as late as the 25th of April, and on any day between those two. Because the Feast of the Epiphany is fixed to always be on the 6th of January, this means that in some years we may have only one Sunday after Epiphany, while in other years we can have as many as six Sundays after Epiphany, or, in fact, 2, 3, 4, or 5 Sundays after Epiphany. We shall always have at least one Sunday after Epiphany, but six is the most we can have. How many Sundays we have after Epiphany in any particular year depends on where Easter falls in that 35 day period from 22 March to 25 April of that year.

And, you ask, this is important for what? Well, for what is put into the Prayer Book. It turns out that the number of Sundays after Epiphany determines how many Sundays we shall have after Trinity. If we have a lot of one, we don't have as many of the other and *vice versa*. This year with Six Sundays after Epiphany, we shall have only 22 Sundays after Trinity. This is important because we have to have a Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for the Communion Services for each Sunday. In the first three editions of the English PB, Propers were provided for 5 Sundays after Epiphany and 24 Sundays after Trinity, but no more, which turned out to leave some gaps, namely for the 6th Sunday after Epiphany and for the 25th and 26th Sundays after Trinity. This was taken care of when the Church of England PB was revised in 1662 by adding a set of Propers for the 6th Sunday after Epiphany, and the rubric that you can find at the bottom of page 224 of your 1928 PB. That rubric is a little confusing if you forget that the last Sunday after Trinity is always the Sunday Next before Advent.

What the Bishops, who were involved with revising the 1662 PB recognized, was that in a sense, the Epiphany season was simply sort of a short model of the Trinity season, that each of those seasons provided a model of Jesus' life that extended from His earthly ministry all the way to the Last Day. Yes, both of those seasons leave out Christmas and Easter because we celebrate them in full, but the question is: when do we, on a Sunday, ever look at and think about the Last Day of the Earth. Well, for a long time, the Church didn't. So the Prayer Book revisers in the

1660s decided to look at the Last Day on the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany; and then in years when there was a 25th or 26th Sunday after Trinity, to use the Propers for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany as the Propers for the Last numbered Sunday before the Sunday Next before Advent.

So today, the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, is the Sunday of the Last Epiphany, a celebration and an anticipation at the end of the Epiphany season of the day on which Jesus Christ will make Himself manifest to the entire world, believers and nonbelievers when, as is said in Matthew 24:30 *all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*

Each of the elements of the Propers for this rare day is worthy of a sermon on it all by itself; however, we have some business to take care of today in our parish meeting. So, with all that in mind, let's just get an overview of what our Propers for today say about this Last Epiphany, the Epiphany of Christ on the Last day. The Collect, Epistle, and Gospel begin on page 117 of your Book of Common Prayer if you want to follow along.

The Collect for the Day sets the tone and theme for our worship and learning for today: *O God, Whose blessed Son was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil, and make us the sons of God, and heirs of eternal life; Grant us, we beseech Thee, that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves, even as He is pure; that, when He shall appear again with power and great glory, we made be made like unto Him in His eternal and glorious kingdom; where with Thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Ghost, He liveth and reigneth ever, one God, world without end. Amen.*

Archdeacon Melville Scott sees three Epiphanies in this Collect much like the Ghosts of Charles Dicken's Christmas Story: the Epiphany of the Past, the Epiphany of the Present, and the Epiphany of the Future. The Epiphany of the Past is Jesus' coming to earth in the flesh to "destroy the works of the devil, and make us the sons of God, and heirs of eternal life". In the Epiphany of the Present, it is up to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to purify ourselves, so that when in the Epiphany of the Future, when Jesus comes: "again with power and great glory, we made be made like unto Him in His eternal and glorious kingdom;". The lessons that follow after this take up these themes.

In the OT lesson, Isaiah prophesies of Jesus' Second Coming in verses 15 & 16 of chapter 66 15 "For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. 16 For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many. This agrees with St. Peter's Prophecy of the Second Coming in 2 Peter 3:1-7:

2 Peter 3:1 This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, 2 that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, 3 knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." 5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed

out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. He continues at verse 10 with a warning:

2 Peter 3:10-12 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies(1)will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.(2) 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

The Psalms speak of God's glory and power and in Psalm 98 (page 461 of your PB) we read in verses 8 & 9: ⁸Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together ⁹Before the LORD; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity. Yes, the Lord will come, and the last day is the Epiphany of Judgment.

In St. John's Epistle, Archdeacon Scott identifies several more Epiphanies, all lumped under the title, the Epiphany of the Sons of God. He notes that each of the Epistle lessons of the Sundays after Epiphany identified the manifestation of some feature or attribute of the Christian character. St John looks at their present situation and their future. At the present time, he notes that those who will be Sons of God have been chosen by Him and are the subjects of God's love and fatherly care:

ESV 1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Scott, without making any reference to what St. Paul says about who the children of God are, notes that anyone who becomes one of God's children, did not become His child by virtue of any merit of their own; God simply chose them. St. John continues by looking into the future and prophesying the glorification of the faithful on the Last Day: 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

“we will be like him,” What a statement! But it comports with what St. Paul said in Philippians 3:20-21 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Scott says that we shall not be able to see Jesus as He really is unless we are in that glorified body that He will give us, that we cannot truly see Jesus until we are like Him.

St. John then identifies the task that faces us and all Christians, that of sanctification, of continually trying to purify ourselves:

1 John 3:3-8 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. 4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that

he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

St. John seems to set an impossible task for us when he says: 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. St. Paul told us he knew how hard it is to stay on the path of sanctification when he wrote in Romans 7:18-19 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Do these two passages contradict one another? No! John is talking about those who revel in their sins, who *want* to commit them. Any person, even one who is regenerate, who has been born again, will continue to sin, as John already indicated in 1 John 2:1-2 which are one of our comfortable words: ESV 1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. John is writing about the ideal and not the real. Man shall not become sinless until he has been cleansed and given that glorified body. Scott says, "We need an Epiphany of Grace if we are to be ready for the Epiphany of Judgment.

The Gospel lesson is a clear prophecy of the time of tribulation before the Last Day, and then of the Last Day. There will be false Prophets and false Christs, and then the Lord will come as the angel prophesied to the disciples in Acts 1:9-11 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The message of this day and its Propers is simple: Live, and Work, and Pray and Worship so as to be ready for the Last Epiphany, the Epiphany of Judgment. AMEN!