

EPIPHANY 2010
HEROD, THE WISE MEN, AND THE CHRIST CHILD

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Matthew 2:1-12

“Arise, shine, for your light has come.” (Is. 60:1)

“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Is. 60:3)

Indeed, symbolically of course, they did come. The Epiphany story is of the wise men from the East following the light of God’s pure unbounded love for all humankind only to find that this pure love of God was incarnated as a vulnerable child. They paid homage to the child and offered gifts. But being “warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (Mt. 2:12).

This wonderful, evocative story suggests many powerful truths about both God and humans, but I want to highlight only two: The first is the negative and unpleasant truth that not everyone is overjoyed and brought to their knees by the realization that the light of God’s love shines on all persons, that God cares for, attracts and redeems all of us irrespective of our other allegiances, as perhaps only a fragile baby can do. Herod was threatened and, as we know from the continuation of the story, lashed out and killed all children in and around Bethlehem under the age of two. Earthly powers, when threatened, strike out like an injured, caged animal, and can do tremendous harm – but they cannot put out the light of Christ. Years later another earthly power, similarly threatened, was able to put Jesus to death, but could not put out the light of Christ. Christ, the pure unbounded love of God, arose and spread into all the world.

But let us not be deceived. Earthly powers continue to be threatened and to strike out against anything that challenges their insecure grasp on power. This is as true of those in power among the followers of Christ as it is of Herod, as it is of secular powers, as it is of rigid, narrow-minded Ayatollahs or self-righteous Taliban and Qaeda leaders who desire the deaths of thousands of those who disagree with them. Surely, you might say, the followers of Christ have never sought the death of those who disagree with them. Yet, we all know that they have. I will not go into the sad history of Christian persecution and massacre of Jews, Muslims, and of other Christians once Christians gained power in the Western world.

Fortunately, in today’s world there is very little of that killing left among us. But there is plenty of insecurity among those who have built a small power base and who are threatened by new ideas and practices that seem to challenge them, who then lash out and denounce their perceived opponents as agents of evil. Think of the growing army of Fundamentalists who attack science and reason (and who promote laws to kill gays in Uganda); think of the angry, small but loud, group of Anglicans who cannot accept gays and lesbians in roles of leadership in the body of Christ; think of the powerful group in

Rome who will not allow women into power sharing, but who, threatened by the growth of Islam and secularism in their power-base in Europe, try to grab off conservative, dissident Anglicans. All so very insecure; all consumed with their own power; all so many replicas of Herod.

To emphasize the positive in the Epiphany story we look to the Star, the Christ child, and the Wise Men. If we may say that the Star symbolically represents the unbounded love of the one mysterious God, now disclosed fully, and if we may take the wise men to represent the Gentile world, all that was not at that time Jewish or, in the centuries to come, Christian, what are we to say about Jesus the Christ? Surely, we can say that it is *through* Jesus Christ that we have come to worship God the Father, to trust in God's steadfast love, to rely on God's love as redemptive. But must we assert, therefore, that salvation is the *exclusive* right and property of Christians, of those alone who are baptized or in some way have committed themselves to Christ?

This seems to be what is being asserted in John 14:6: "Jesus said, 'I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" And it is clearly what is asserted by the third century bishop, Cyprian: "There is no salvation outside the Church" (see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 206). Then, when Christianity gained the ascendancy in the Western World, this "exclusivism" became the norm and a repressive norm at that. For instance, in the early fourteenth century Pope Boniface VIII declared: "We are obliged by faith to believe and hold – and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess – that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. . . . Furthermore, we declare, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff" (Bettensen, *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 161,163). Can you imagine what might have happened to an ordinary believer who dared to challenge this? And can you imagine the fear and loathing of Jews huddled in their ghettos? Luther challenged the last part about submission to the Roman pontiff, but he did not challenge the major tenet that salvation belongs exclusively to Christians. Such was the power of Herod.

Yet you should know that such exclusivism was not the only voice of believers in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian history. Another point of view that has been called "pluralistic inclusivism" by one of the greatest theologians of our age (Schubert Ogden) was in place. Pluralistic inclusivism rejects the premise of exclusivism, because it understands that faith in Christ entails love of God who loves "all creatures great and small." It is "inclusivist" in that it knows, through Christ, that God's love is for all, is redemptive of all; yet it is "pluralistic," in that it knows that no one religion is itself God, but that religions are all historically-conditioned parts of God's creative process.

This can be seen as implicit in our Epiphany story: the wise men paid homage to the Christ child, and thus implicitly they worshipped God. But *they returned to their own homes by another route!* They knew themselves to be saved even though they simply did not become Christians or Jews. And Paul. Paul is perhaps the chief advocate of the view that faith in Christ means love of God and all whom God loves irrespective of their

particular allegiances. In his major letter, to the Romans, Paul's central theme is that the Good News is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16) by which he meant all humankind. Paul insists that "God shows no partiality," and in his famous claim that "a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28) he is not rejecting the Judaism of his heritage, but is rather insisting that it is faith in God that justifies rather than obedience to the demands of a particular religion. Paul was counteracting the exclusivist attitude of the Judaism that he had known with a "pluralistic inclusivism" that had been disclosed to him by his encounter with Christ. So he reminds the Galatians: "Now that faith has come we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian (the Law), for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 25-28). Being "baptized into Christ" does not confer a special status, nor does being "one in Christ" mean that now there is a new superior religion that supersedes the old; it proclaims the Good News that God's redemption is not linked to culture, religion, or gender, but is, rather, available to all. This we know *through* Christ. (In fact, at another time and in another place Paul seems to fear that baptism may be regarded as initiating one into a new special-relation religion, so he says to the fractious Corinthians: "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius so that no one can say you were baptized in my name" [I Cor. 1:14-15]).

Even Peter, in at least one place, is portrayed as realizing that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34).

Down through the ages this viewpoint, that allegiance to Christ entailed, not "exclusivism" but "pluralistic inclusivism," maintained itself among some of the deeper Christian believers. I want to mention only a few voices from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One, F. D. Maurice, an Anglican of the mid nineteenth century, confessed his own need for a Being able to deliver him and all creatures, as he said, from "an overwhelming weight of selfishness." "That Being," he says, was the one who "was exhibited in the cross of Jesus Christ." So Maurice states forthrightly his "belief that God has redeemed *mankind*, that He has chosen a family to be witnesses of that redemption, that we who are baptized into that family must claim for ourselves the title of sons of God [and] must witness to others that they have a claim to it as well as we" (*The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice: Chiefly Told in His Own Letters* Vol. 2, pp. 15, 16). In other words Maurice sees that *God* is the redeemer; that Jesus, disclosed as the *Christ*, bears witness to this truth; that *humans of all stripes* are the *redeemed*; and that *Christians are to bear witness to this fact*.

There have been many other great Christians who have witnessed to the good news of God's inclusive, redemptive love, among whom are the Swiss Protestant, Karl Barth, and several Jesuits (e.g., Karl Rahner and Roger Haight). But I want to end with the words of a theologian mentioned earlier, Schubert Ogden: "The claim 'only in Jesus Christ,'" he says, "must be interpreted to mean, not that God acts to redeem only in the

history of Jesus and in no other history – *although he in fact redeems every history* – is the God whose redemptive action is decisively re-presented in the word that Jesus speaks and is” (*The Reality of God*, p. 173).

With the wise men we gaze upon the face of the Christ child and we see the love of God. We know that God creates and redeems all humankind irrespective of their partial allegiances, and being “clothed with Christ,” we have the power to testify to this truth. Even Herod, finally, is redeemed by God’s pure unbounded love.