

Your Own Epiphany

In the name him who is the Light that shines in our darkness, dear friends in Christ: As I've said before, the main theme and thrust of the short Christmas season is that God has become *man* – that in the Bethlehem manger, the fullness of the Godhead is dwelling bodily in the form of a weak, helpless infant who is subject to all of the perils, problems, and limitations of our fallen human flesh. The main emphasis of Epiphany, the season we're in now and that is coming to its end, is the flip side of the coin; that this very ordinary looking man, who was raised in an obscure Galilean village and who spent his young adulthood working as a common carpenter – this man named Jesus, much to the surprise of his contemporaries, is truly *God*.

That's what we've been seeing week to week as little sparks and flashes of Jesus' divinity have come shining through. When he's baptized in the Jordan we hear the voice of the Father declare, "*This* is my beloved Son". When Jesus drives an unclean spirit from a man, it cries out as it goes, "*You* are the Holy One of God". Then last week we saw Jesus perform a wide spread of healing miracles. In each of these episodes we see evidence of Jesus' *divine* nature. They are proofs that this man, Jesus, is God.

Today with the Transfiguration we've come to the climax of the Epiphany, as for a brief period Jesus pulls back the veil that conceals the fullness of his divine majesty, and gives three of his disciples a glimpse of his glory. If these men had any question about who it was they've been dealing with, they don't any more. They've seen the light. They've seen his light. And so now his Epiphany is complete: the wondrous mystery that in Jesus God and man have come together in one person is completely revealed. It's no longer hidden from the eyes of men. And this is why we call it his Epiphany – a word that literally means "to shine forth" in order to make the truth visible and known.

But all of this refers to the Epiphany of Jesus. In today's Epistle, St. Paul speaks of every believer in Jesus having their own epiphany. That's where I'd like to direct your attention today: to your own personal epiphany. What's that? Well, usually, when we speak of one of us mere mortals having an epiphany, it means that the person has a sudden flash of insight. It's as if a light has gone on in the mind, and something that wasn't understood or seen before has now become clear.

Certainly that happens to us in spiritual sense. Our initial conversion to the Christian faith is an epiphany of this kind. Before we come to faith in Jesus, the Bible describes us as spiritually blind and darkened in our understanding – so benighted in fact that we don't even realize how bad off we are. We're so accustomed to the dark that we don't know we can't see. But then the light of God's truth begins to break through, first to reveal our sin and shameful deeds. It shows us how we are rightfully under God's wrath and judgment. It's this shocking epiphany that reveals who we are as sinners and where we stand before the Lord as a result. And that's truly frightening. But it's precisely this epiphany of understanding that prepares for the greater revelation: that God in his mercy has sent his only-begotten Son to be our Savior to suffer and die on the cross in our place, and how by trusting in him forgiveness and life eternal are ours. This is the greater epiphany of faith in Christ. It's what St. Paul means when he says that "God ... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus." So, like I said, just coming to the Christian faith is an epiphany of sorts.

And the epiphanies just keep on coming as we continue to grow in the faith. As we spend time in the Word, each new insight that the Holy Spirit grants is another spiritual light coming on, or, if you prefer, a brightening of the light that's already there. Speaking from personal experience, I'll be studying a text that doesn't quite make sense to me and then in a flash of inspiration, "Oh, that's what this means!" Or suddenly I'll see a connection that I hadn't before. And to tell you the truth, one of my greatest joys as a teacher of the Scriptures is to lead others to those moments of illumination. It's the "Aha!" moment. I can't actually see the light bulbs appearing over people's heads, but I can read it from the expression on their faces. Sometimes too you get a chain reaction as a whole string of lights come on – one insight leading to another and then another. It's wonderful. And so in this sense the Christian life is one of continuous epiphany.

But the personal epiphany that Paul is talking about today is something entirely different. He's not emphasizing so much the light of Christ that shines within a Christian as they come to greater spiritual insight; he's stressing the light of Christ that shines *forth* from a Christian that is seen by and gives light to others – just like Jesus does at his Transfiguration. But in our case, you might think of it as a reflected light. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun in the darkness of the night, so a Christian ought to reflect the light of Christ in the darkness of this world.

The biblical example Paul gives is that of Moses. You may remember that several times Moses went up on Mount Sinai to converse with the Lord. There he would receive God's Word and then go back down to relay what the Lord had said to the Israelites. But this caused a problem. It happened that being in the presence of the radiant glory of God changed Moses' appearance. For several days after one of his audiences with the Lord, the face of Moses would glow with the reflected light of God. It's like it soaked into Moses – sort of like one of those glow-in-the-dark balls or toys that you "recharge" by putting under a bright lamp. This reflected light would fade away over time; but for the first several days it would be so powerful that the Israelites compelled Moses to wear a veil over his face because they couldn't stand to look at him. It was like, "Hey, Moses, turn down the bright beams. You're blinding us".

Paul is saying that something similar happens to us. We come here week after week to do what Moses did: namely, to rise above the plain, as it were, and come up on the spiritual mountain to be in the presence of the Lord. We come here to converse with him, and to receive his Word of grace, forgiveness, and instruction. The idea then is that we ought to go forth from here to follow our weekly pursuits with a changed appearance. The light of Christ we have received ought to be shining through our words and actions in such a way that it contrasts sharply with the darkness of the world around us. But unlike Moses, he says, who hid his face under a veil, we are to let the light shine boldly and openly precisely so that others can see it. Your epiphany – your shining forth – is your witness to the world. And yes, it ought to be bright enough to make those who don't share the light of Christ and who dwell in the darkness a little uncomfortable.

Now, unfortunately, responding to their discomfort, very often we're tempted to do exactly what Moses did and cover it up. We're afraid that if we stand out in the crowd, the crowd won't be able to stand us. So it's awfully tempting to reach for the dimmer switch and turn the light down a few notches. It helps us fit in and avoid conflicts. And of course it depends on what crowd you're with. We all have different circles that we interact with and so we're tempted to match our words and actions to fit the standards of the group we're with at the moment. In this way we're more like chameleons than Christians, always changing our skin to match the color and pattern of the backdrop.

But you see the problem here: so often I hear people who are outside the church say, “I don’t see why you think being a Christian is so important. You’re just the same as everyone else.” Sadly, more often than not, they’re right. And it’s because we’re afraid to let the light of Christ shine forth in our lives. But friends, if they can’t see the difference, if we never shine forth with the light, they’ll never see or be drawn to the light themselves. So Paul calls us to be up front about it; to shine your light boldly before the world precisely so that they can see it. Why? Because we have received God’s grace and mercy in Jesus; and being full of God’s grace and mercy, we want them to receive it too.

While doing this, Paul says we renounce disgraceful and underhanded ways. He means that our witness of Christ to the world ought to be forthright and genuine. It means more than slapping a bumper sticker on your car that bears a Christian message, or wearing a T-shirt with a catchy Christian slogan. There’s nothing inherently wrong with these sorts of things; but they are at best quite superficial. Besides, there’s nothing worse than driving through heavy traffic in a large city and having some obnoxious jerk who’s in a big hurry and driving like a madman pull in front of you, and he’s got a “Honk if you love Jesus” sticker on his car. Everybody’s honking at him all right; but it isn’t because they love Jesus. And here the fool probably thinks he’s evangelizing the world. “Wow, hear that? I’m surrounded by Christians. Can’t you just feel the love?”

Similarly, on a collective level as the church, we want our light to shine forth clearly and boldly. It ought to stand in sharp contrast to the world. But these days so many churches are opting to go the opposite way. They think the way to attract the world to Christ is to make the church more like the world. So they’ll tamper with God’s Word to soften the message and water it down to make it more palatable. They’ll avoid talking about sin and God’s wrath and judgment against it, for instance, or they’ll downplay the exclusive claims of Christ to be the only way, truth, and life. The idea is that if the church becomes dark enough, the folks on the outside whose eyes aren’t accustomed to the light will be more comfortable coming in. Now, even if that were true, and there’s a lot of evidence that suggests that it’s not, what good is a church that encourages its members and everyone else to stay in the dark?

Other well intentioned but equally misguided churches try the old bait and switch. Within the past couple years I’ve seen, for example, churches try to attract interest with circus clowns. Instead of hearing God’s Word and listening to a sermon, you get to watch some guy dressed like Bozo acting silly, doing tricks, and twisting balloons into animal shapes. Sure, while he’s at it he’ll slip in a few words about Jesus – but not too much, because you don’t want to scare anyone off by talking about *religion*. Along the same lines I’ve seen churches try to attract various interest groups by adopting popular themes from the culture. They’ll have biker church to attract motorcycle enthusiasts, or polka church to draw ... well, I don’t know, I guess they must think someone actually likes polka; but I can’t imagine who. In the cities and suburbs I’ve read about churches taking on a *Star Wars* theme. People are encouraged to come dressed as their favorite characters from the film series. The pastor wears a Wookiee costume and speaks not about Jesus the Savior, but Jesus the Master Jedi Knight. One church did *Cat in the Hat* Communion. The celebrant wore a *Cat in the Hat* outfit and spoke the words of institution in Dr. Seuss style rhyme. The two altar boys were dressed up like Thing One and Thing Two. Speaking of cats, some places they’re doing what they call “pet church”. In order to attract animal lovers, they ask you to bring Fido or Fluffy to sit with you in the service. They even have what they call pet communion on certain Sundays. I’m not sure what that is. Truthfully, I don’t want to know. But I’m sure that it crosses the line. You can’t make those who are profane sacred by taking what is sacred and making it profane.

It's the wrong approach entirely. We have the power of God's Word. We have the light of his truth and his grace in Jesus Christ. We don't need gimmicks. We need to reflect the light that Christ shines on us out there, and let it do its work.

How does that light appear? Well, for one it shines through our actions and behavior. We see it in what are called the nine fold fruits of the Spirit. They're mentioned in Galatians chapter five. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These virtues are to be the hallmark of every Christian's life. In fact, if you are a Christian then you must have the Holy Spirit. And if so, then he *is* working these fruits in your life; you can't help it. What you can do is hide the fruit or spoil it with your sin. But that's why we keep coming back here to the mountain. We come to confess our sins. We come to let Christ clean and polish our mirrors with his forgiveness. We come to let his light shine on us again and again so that we can shine it before the world with our behavior.

But that's only one way, and due to our ever present sinful natures, it will never be the best way. There's a frequently quoted saying attributed to St. Francis that goes something like, "Wherever you go, preach Christ to others; but only when it's absolutely necessary should you use any words." The idea is that your life ought to say it all. It's a noble-sounding sentiment, I suppose; but it denies the fundamental truth that the Lord works in this world and reaches people through his Word. You didn't become a Christian because somebody was nice to you or did you a favor. You became a believer because someone told you about Jesus and what he did to save you from your sin. Sure, the life of a Christian can lend weight to the words and cause people to take notice; but it's a mistake to confuse the fruit with the seed. The fruit of faith are the virtues I mentioned. The seed is the Word. That's what must take root and grow in people. That's the light we need to shine on them so that they can see and know the truth.

And so this is your personal epiphany: your witness to the world in your actions, yes; but even more importantly in what you say. This is why Paul says, "By the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience." That is to say, we talk about Jesus. We tell it like it is. We tell them what he did and why. "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

May our gracious God and Father, who shone in our hearts the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ, cause us to shine brightly and boldly with his reflected light that many others may see and share with us in his glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!