

## Epiphany III

### January 24, 2010

As many of us learned in Sunday School, the theme of Epiphany is the manifestation, the showing off to the world, of Jesus—of who he is, of what he is about. The Gospel readings these last few weeks come at this from some fascinating perspectives. On the feast of Epiphany itself, it's the Wise Men who tell who Jesus is, and what he's about. At the Baptisms of Jesus it's God the Father, (and John the Baptist), who do that. Last week's Gospel was the story of turning water into wine. In that story, it's Mary who really pushes Jesus front and center—and who makes him known as the chosen one.

In the gospel we just heard, it's Jesus himself who proclaims who he is. But that isn't immediately obvious, and a careful look at the reading from Nehemiah really helps to see the significance of what's going on in the synagogue at Nazareth. So we start with Nehemiah.

Here's what's going on. It's around the year 400 B.C. Led by Ezra the Priest and Nehemiah the governor, the Jewish exiles have returned from captivity in Babylon, and are trying to re-build both the city of Jerusalem and the nation—the culture really—of Israel. Things are not going well. Based on what they had heard from prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, the exiles expected everything to be just perfect and wonderful when they got back. A real cake-walk. Instead, the land and the people were a mess. The whole country was in ruins, just about everything had been destroyed, and the people there had an unexpected lack of purpose. They couldn't get along with one another; there was no common ideal or value; and the returning Exiles' great dreams of a renewed Israel had given way to frustration, anger, and hopelessness.

It was in order to begin to heal this absolute lack of common identity and purpose that Ezra called the people together and read to them from the Book of the Law.

It was a book they may well have never heard before; a book that presented the people with the desires and the demands of God. Amazingly, what happened—and this story is surely a stylized account of it—what happened was that Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded. It worked.

The exiles began to come together as a people who shared a common vision of themselves, as a community who knew who they were: They were the people gathered around the Law; they were the people of the Book. Their identity was to be found in a common reverence and commitment to Torah—to the Law that God gave to his people. While this is not all there is to the business of Torah becoming central to the life of the people of Israel, (and while this one event is certainly not all Ezra and Nehemiah did), none the less, this moment is central to the development and continuation of Israel's identity after the defeat and destruction of the nation, the end of the monarchy, and the great struggles of the Exile and return.

This is an identity that has served Israel well, and that has persisted for almost 2,500 years. This is how you recognize the people of Israel—they are the community which gathers with the Law in the center, and which is committed by covenant to understanding both their collective and their individual lives in the light of that Law. This has set the shape of the synagogue service, and it has formed the self-consciousness of a great people. It is a self-consciousness, and a people, who have survived incredible hardships and horrors.

All of this is background for Jesus going into the synagogue to teach. Jesus begins as Ezra began, standing on a raised platform, with the people gathered around, reading from the sacred text.

Jesus read from Isaiah, from a passage that was part of the section of that Book that was so important to Jesus. Everyone there thought they understood exactly what was going on; that is was the same thing that had been going on for centuries.

When Jesus sat down to teach, everyone expected him to do what the Levites around Ezra did. They expected him to explain, to interpret, to make present, clear and relevant for the current situation both the words and the meaning of the ancient text. (Which, by the way, is an honorable task; it's a big chunk of what I try to do up here every week.)

But Jesus didn't do that. Instead, Jesus did something totally different, something totally new. Instead, Jesus said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not interpreted, not clarified, not spoken about brilliantly, not even totally figured out. But fulfilled. Think about that.

When a promise is kept, the promise isn't important any more. What's important is the keeping of it. In the same way, when the Scripture is fulfilled, what is central, what is most important, what is the focus, is not the scripture, but the fulfillment.

When Jesus, fresh from the desert and filled with the Spirit, sat in Ezra's seat and claimed to be the fulfillment of scripture, he was saying that *what it means to be the people of God* had changed fundamentally and forever. He was saying that the people of God would no longer be constituted, would no longer be identified, by being gathered around the Torah, the sacred written Word. Instead, Jesus is saying, what it now means to be the people of God is to be gathered around the fulfillment of that written Word—it's to be gathered around Jesus, around the incarnate Word.

Everything was different now. Everything had changed.

That was the big shift, that was the big difference Jesus brought. It still is. This scene in Nazareth becomes the new vision—it becomes our vision—of who we are and what we are about. We are the people who are gathered with Jesus of Nazareth in the center. We are the people who find our lives, our hope, our destiny, and our mission in this man who preached that day in Nazareth, and who find it no where else.

As Christians, Jesus is the center—of our faith, of our worship, of our lives. We can come to know Jesus in a number of ways—the Bible is powerfully one of them, but the bible is not at the center. The sacraments are another way, so are the holy traditions of the church, so is the life the life we live together—together as St. Nicholas', together as the Episcopal Church; so is the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so are the teachings of the ancient Fathers, and the fruits of our own prayers—all of these are ways we can come to know Jesus, and to know him better. But none of theses is at the center. None of them alone tells us, really, who we are and what we are about.

Only Jesus is at the center; and he comes to us in all these ways and more. Sometimes it is harder to see and hear him clearly than it is at other times; and sometimes we don't all see or hear him in the same way. But that's not a reason to put something else in the center; it just means we have to look and listen with a bit more energy, and a bit more charity.

So I leave you with this image, this picture from Luke's Gospel of what it means for us to be us. It's simple, really, but not at all easy. For Jesus stands among us today as he did then; and proclaims himself to be the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the very best that humanity has ever hoped for. And he calls us to look at him, and to listen to him—and to let nothing else replace that.