

A Light for the Revelation to the Gentiles (Candlemas 2024)

Today is Candlemas and as it happens I was asked to preach on this same Sunday 3 years ago. If you recall – and I am sure you all remember every word – I made a big deal of the fact that Candlemas and Groundhog Day are the same thing. I went back and re-read my talk from that day, wondering whether in the spirit of Groundhog Day I might "borrow from" it. Alas no. That talk was delivered in January 2021 when we were in the midst of a Covid lockdown and it mostly dealt with looking forward to a time when we could meet in person. So I have had to start from scratch.

Instead of focusing on this one Sunday I thought I would look back over this past month. There's also a bit where I try and cover the whole of space and time, and at one point I summarise all of Greek philosophy and a few Eastern religions in one sentence. I'm kind of interested to see how that turns out. You might just wish I had recycled my Groundhog Day talk.

Back to this month though, It feels like this year, more than in the past, we have as a church really highlighted the significance of the season of Epiphany. Every week April has encouraged us to examine our lives and look for moments of God's revelation. Going back to basics then, Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning "appearance" or "manifestation". As a distinct part of the Christian year, it originated in the Eastern Christian church where it was known as Theophania, "divine revelation". Fun trivial aside: Theophania is where we get the name "Tiffany" which was traditionally given to girls born at this time of year. Another name for the season in the early Eastern church was Ta Phota or "the Lights", hence the procession of candles that give us Candlemas. So we have these two ideas – revelation and the lights. And when we put them together like that I get an image of someone crawling around in the dark searching for their keys or a lost earring and then someone turns on the lights and we see everything clearly. That's how Epiphany feels to me.

That theme runs through all the Gospel readings we have had in the past month but the starkest illustration of this idea of the lights coming on was in the reading two weeks ago about the calling of the disciple Nathaniel. If you recall he goes from mocking Jesus for coming from Nazareth in one breath to declaring him the Son of God in the next. Truly a lightbulb moment. And in today's Gospel we hear these words together in the line "a light for the revelation of the Gentiles".

I am going to focus on two quotes from this story of Simeon, one telling us something about him, and one thing actually said by him. We are told Simeon was "looking forward to the consolation of Israel" which here means he was expecting the arrival of the Messiah. And when he is holding Jesus he talks of a salvation that God has "prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles". And my overall hope is that once I have explored these two statements – awaiting a Messiah, prepared in the presence of all peoples - it might light up how encounter God as we look out for new epiphanies.

So let's first look at this idea of awaiting a Messiah. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr divided all human cultures into two groups: those where a Messiah was expected, and those that were not awaiting a Messiah. I think that's a pretty interesting way to sift humanity but we should spend some time considering what it means for a culture as a whole to await a Messiah. In its most superficial sense we could just think of it as longing for someone who will bring us the justice we feel we have been missing. So it could just be a mighty warrior to avenge us against our enemies. But if that is all that it means to await a Messiah then Niebuhr has it all

wrong: surely every society that has ever existed has wanted that. Just think of the elections in the UK and the US this year, societies so polarized that whichever candidate any of the voters supports is someone they see as essential for saving them from the opposing candidate. So it must mean more than an agent of vengeance.

As we know, the Messiah that was born in Bethlehem was a very different type of saviour, bringing a very different type of salvation. If we look to Old Testament prophets who we could say were awaiting the Messiah we can discern two elements of the Messianic time they were looking to. Most obviously is the form of the Messiah himself. The clearest example would be Isaiah's suffering servant:

“despised and rejected by mankind,...
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain pierced for our transgressions...
he was crushed for our iniquities...

This would be a saviour who instead of leading us in battle would preach that we love our enemies and turn the other cheek.

In addition to the person of the Messiah, we have prophets telling us what we would need to be like to face this Messiah. One essential element they zero in on is the need for a new heart. We could look at Elijah and Jeremiah berating their fellow citizens for not accepting blame for their disasters. Or Psalm 51 telling us that the Lord is not looking for sacrificial burnt offerings but rather our contrite and surrendered hearts. There is an echo too in today's reading from Malachi saying we must first be purified by the refiner's fire and only then will our offering i.e. our hearts, be pleasing to the Lord. It goes without saying that these are counterintuitive and difficult, going against our natural inclination for violent simplicity; usually a signal that God is at work.

Now let's look at the other phrase I highlighted “prepared in the presence of all peoples”. What I just described were examples of how Jewish prophets awaited the Messiah. What about other peoples? Could we say there were Gentile cultures that were awaiting something similar? As it happens we know of many cultures where such ideas took root. The teachings of Buddha, Confucius, and the words attributed to Socrates often state that the path to salvation lies not in overcoming others, but in transforming ourselves, transcending our egos, living in empathy and selflessness. And beyond these I have named, there were no doubt many other cultures whose teachings were not preserved or passed on to us, and of course many wise women who would have alighted upon these truths.

Additionally there are examples where we might even say these Gentiles echoed Hebrew prophecies about the person who would accompany this transformation – to name just two examples that seemed to foretell the birth and death of Jesus, we have the Latin poet Virgil who wrote of a virgin giving birth of a son who would herald a transformation in human nature, and we have Plato in his most famous work, *The Republic*, writing of a perfectly moral man whom society would violently put to death.

I don't think it is too much of a stretch to sense among these sages the work of the Holy Spirit. Now in case you think I am saying something heretical (I'm looking nervously at April here), this is in fact exactly what some of the early Church fathers and Christian writers believed. Clement of Alexandria for one was convinced that Virgil had foreseen the coming of Jesus and Mary. We don't have to go that far, but the idea that the Spirit as was at work among all nations fits with Simeon's comment that salvation was “prepared in the presence of all peoples”. And there are other scriptural signs suggesting a wide-ranging and roaming spirit of God that was active

across all of Creation from the very beginning. Remember the beginning of John's Gospel which talks of the Word, the Logos, the diving reason that was there at the beginning of Creation? And in the very second verse of Genesis we have "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters". Take those two passages and then look at the story told of Lady Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs::

I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
²⁴When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
²⁵before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
²⁶before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
²⁷I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰ Then I was constantly^(a) at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

That last bit hits home for me. I so often approach God like an accused criminal making my excuses; how much better to think of God as delighting in us.

Before we wrap up then let me summarise what we have covered. A Gospel reading that revolves around the expectation of a Messiah and a light of revelation to Gentiles led us to look at the difference between expecting a saviour who helps you defeat your enemies on the one hand, and the Messiah that we know who preaches a transformation of our hearts. And that led us to consider Gentiles who awaited this kind of Messiah and how that testifies to the work of the Spirit in all times and places since Creation. The spirit of God hovering over the waters, "Rejoicing in his whole world, and delighting in mankind" – it makes perfect sense that wise and open-minded people the world over would have been catching glimpses of this wisdom and would be receptive to the news that the lights had come on, revealing the birth of the one they had been hoping for.

Now as we set ourselves up to experience our own epiphanies let us keep that image in mind, of a God that wants a relationship with us, that delights in every one of us. I would like to close with a poem by Edwina Gateley called *Let Your God Love You*. It works best if you close your eyes and have someone say it to you.

Be silent.
Be still.
Alone.

Empty.
Before your God.
Say nothing.
Ask nothing.
Be silent.
Be still.

Let your God
look upon you.
That is all.
God knows.
God understands.
God loves you with
an enormous love.
God only wants to
look upon you
with that love.
Quiet.
Still.
Be.
Let your God - love you