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Feast of the Epiphany  
January 8, 2012

Normally on this Sunday we would be celebrating the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Instead, our focus is Epiphany. Outside of the Latino community Epiphany has become rather overlooked. Unless it happens to fall on a Sunday, it is seldom observed in church anymore. That is why... with all due respect to the importance of the Baptism of our Lord... I decided that this year we really ought to take the time to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany.

So what is Epiphany all about? The wise men right? But there is more to this day than gold, frankincense and myrrh. Read the fine print on your inserts. Epiphany is also known as The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Now more than likely, you have never thought of Epiphany that way. Perhaps you're not even clear what that name "Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles" even means. The title shows how the Church has taken one specific event from the life of Jesus and added a great deal of theological significance to it. For the Magi were not just three kings who came to honor Jesus, there were the first non-Jewish people to recognize and acknowledge him as the Son of G-D. This was truly revolutionary and had enormous ramifications in how we understand G-D and even for how we live.

Now the idea of G-D being reaching out to everyone is not new to us as Christians. But for the Jews of Jesus' time it was a pretty foreign concept. And if we want to understand the significance of Epiphany, that is where we need to start. Throughout Jewish history there has been one constant- they are G-D's chosen people. Their relationship with G-D was unique and G-D has specially selected them set apart from all other people. And so the very idea that the G-D of Israel would reach out beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles was radical to say the least.

We see this in bitter disputes the early disciples had with Jewish leaders about how just how much of the Jewish Law still held sway, especially when it came to Gentile converts. The Book of Acts tells us that for the first several years of its existence The Church understood its faith as being only a variation of Judaism and not a distinct religion. But in time, even this last vestige fell away. Christianity became independent and drew converts from all over the world. And that is one of the defining strengths of our faith- it is open and available to anyone- no matter who they are or where they come from.

Yet this inclusive, Gentile revolution occurred so long ago that, now, almost two thousand years later, we have lapsed back into the pre-Christian mentality- it is now we Christians who see ourselves as the "chosen people." If outsiders want G-D then they need to come to us.

Yet this conflicts with the very essence of what Jesus' incarnation was all about. Jesus became one of us in order that all of us might find a way to connect with G-D.

That is indeed something worth celebrating. But as we saw in the evolution of the early Church, that is not always appealing, especially for those of us who see ourselves as insiders. But whether we like it or not, G-D is no longer private property... and so our way- our understanding is no longer exclusive. While that is liberating, it also diminishes our status as being "special."

That's hard to accept. We all want to be special- we all want to have some unique standing. And if we have the corner on G-D, then that is indeed a whole lot of status. But the idea of being one of G-D's insiders goes against everything our faith is about. For in becoming a human being G-D is no longer bound to a single nation or people... and it is ludicrous to think that we in the Church are now somehow exempt from this. No matter what you have heard from priests or preachers, G-D is not the exclusive property of any one denomination or tradition. G-D is available to all of us because G-D meets us where we are. If you want to find G-D you don't have to travel to some sacred site- you don't have to go through any particular ceremony- you don't have to affirm a statement of beliefs- you don't have to change anything at all - G-D is available to you right where you are.

All of this wrangling over who holds special status reminds me of the Disney movie, "The Incredibles." Although it's a cartoon, it actually tackles some pretty heavy themes. In particular, it grapples with what it means to be special. The villain, Syndrome, has captured the hero, Mr. Incredible. It is important to note that Syndrome has no super powers of his own- all his powers come from his high tech inventions. And in his mind, that gives him all the more reason to gloat because he has defeated the super-strong and nigh invincible hero.

So as all villains are apt to do, he starts to lay out his fiendish plan- he is going to sell his inventions to the highest bidder allowing anyone who buys them the chance to become a superhero too. But his closing remark cuts Mr. Incredible to the quick, "And when everyone is special- no one will be."

"When everyone is special- no one will be." In the movie that line rings with an ominous tone. But when it comes to our faith, it is this very desire to be "special" that impedes our relationship with G-D. If we are to mature in our faith we must be willing to let go of the very idea of being "special." For no one has the exclusive handle on G-D- . It is true that our denominations and traditions have a lot to offer but we can no longer afford to think of new or alternative ways of relating to G-D as being competition.

Instead of fretting about the orthodoxy and purity of our own denomination we should instead be worried about the Gospel. If someone comes along with a new and effective way of sharing the message of Jesus Christ with our world- we ought not to automatically view them with suspicion because they are a threat to our little dominion- we ought to rejoice that the Gospel is reaching a new group of people.

In the birth of Jesus Christ G-D has become one of us. And that means that G-D is accessible to all of us. Epiphany is the affirmation of that wonderful reality. It is arrogant to think that G-D would somehow be so limited as to be accessible only through the clergy or a particular denomination or tradition. If we are really committed to sharing the Gospel- if we really want to help other people find G-D then we must always remember that thanks to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, no one is an insider. G-D is now open to everyone and our way of finding Him, no matter how time honored, is not the only way. That is the very essence of what Epiphany ... by becoming manifest, not only to the people of Israel, but to all the world, G-D moved beyond the boundaries and restrictions and for the first time, reached out to all of humanity. No one may be "chosen" anymore but thanks to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we can relate directly to G-D and that is more than enough to make us all special.