

Epiphany: Fulfilment, Conflict and Contrasting Images.

Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 60: 1-6

The meaning and purpose of Epiphany have been contested in many circles. Nonetheless, the generally accepted definition is that Epiphany is a feast that celebrates the “shining forth” or revelation of God to humanity in human form. Just like Christmas, it offers a story of God’s new action in the world through the conception of Jesus Christ which is a manifestation of God’s saving presence.

This action, in a world dominated by sin, continues God’s purpose to restore creation to the original intentions of the creator. On the one hand, Epiphany is a story of fulfilment. It brings forth new tidings - a reality that that which was promised long ago through the prophets has come to pass. On the other hand, Epiphany is a constant reminder of the onslaught against God’s action. This onslaught takes its place as one of Matthew’s major themes. The conflict started with Herod, a vassal king, together with Jerusalem elite who made desperate attempts to thwart God’s work. In the emerging narrative, contrasting understanding of Christ is also quite evident. As a result different groups through out Christian history appropriate different images of this Christ.

Fulfilment: The story as recorded in Matthew 2 locates the birth of Christ in Bethlehem as a fulfilment of prophecy. This prophecy is recorded in Micah 5:2 but Matthew combined it with 2 Samuel 5:2 giving Bethlehem a geographic precision, prominence and relevance. Jews expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem and to be from the house of David. This is supported by John 7:42, although the idea about the Messiah’s place of origin was occasionally disputed (see John 7:27.) The narrative of Jesus’ conception is thus located at the very centre of God’s purposes. God’s purposes involve the formation of a people for whom God intends blessing and life. Epiphany also reveals that God’s purposes are constant and faithful. Those who

recognize this and commit themselves to follow Christ, live in a world blessed because God is at work in it and will bring to completion all that God has intended. However, although God's purposes are constant, they are threatened by those who intend to thwart them.

Conflict: Herod and Jerusalem elite responded negatively to Christ's coming. Herod allied with the inaction of the religious elite, put strategies in place to thwart God's action plan. Herod is believed to have been an Idumean (a non-Jew) appointed king of Judea by the Roman senate in 40 B.C. and was in full control by 37 B.C.

Although Herod is remembered for the rebuilding of Jerusalem Temple which he initiated in 19 B.C., he is also remembered for his murderous actions. He was ruthless and brutal – murdered his own wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle among others and finally the babies of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16.)

Herod's action brought deep agony in order to maintain his power. This conflict ought to remind us that the birth of Christianity was a painful one. Mourning and wailing became a hallmark of the early Church in contrast to the ultra-modern image of a wealthy and kingly Church. Lamentation as revealed in Matthew 2 expresses pain, sorrow, and outrage. Through lamentation we recognize that what happened was not normal and unacceptable. Just like with the mothers of Bethlehem, lamentation helps us, beside protest, cope and make sense of the abnormal. Another point is that Epiphany highlights the fact that though Herod's actions may have been brutal and painful, Herod did not have the final word. Through the birth of a saviour, Epiphany brings with it the message of hope, i.e. God will liberate his own.

Contrasting Images: It is the Magi (gentiles) not the chief priests (aristocratic temple priests) or scribes (writing bureaucrats) who

received the revelation though the latter had the prophetic and historical facts of where the Messiah was to be born.

Some have interpreted the story Christ's conception in light of Magi i.e. the context of power and glory (Isaiah 60:1- 6.) They connect Bethlehem with Davidic kingly lineage and Christendom – Hollywood style. This interpretation emphasises on the eschaton. Christ is seen as one who comes as the King of kings, Lord of lords, Supreme Judge to judge and rule the world with all splendour and glory. This group of interpreters concludes that the magi were three wise men or three kings (though the text is silent on this) who brought wealth to worship the new born King. Sadly, some have used such interpretation as this to support their privileged position in Christendom thus fathering some of the most brutal systems in our world: the inquisitions; Nazi; Apartheid just to name a few.

Yet there is another image which has be drawn from the Epiphany story: that of a child, born in simplicity in a “house” (*ten oikian**) not palace. Basically Christ was born into an ordinary family not palace. This is a child who Matthew identified with the least expected – Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Tamar. The humble, those suffering and living in the margins of society – the poor, oppressed - easily identify with this image. They see themselves as the people of God (Matthew 1:21; 4:23; 9:35 – *sosei ton laon autou; to lao**) for whom Christ was born. To such a group, Epiphany reminds them that Christ is a brother, fellow sufferer and a rescuer.

These two examples throw light into the various interpretations and more so contrasting images of the Christ as understood in Christian story.

Epiphany is surely a story of fulfilment, conflict and contrasting images. Amen.

* Editor's attempt at romanization, since the Greek letters in Pastor Kinyua's Word document did not transfer to the PDF