

The Season of Manifestation

As always, on 6 January we begin the season of Epiphany. The name of the season comes ultimately from Greek and means 'manifestation'. It is this theme of 'manifestation', of 'revealing' the divine nature of Jesus that is the primary focus of the gospel readings that we hear in church on the Feast of the Epiphany itself and the Sundays of the Epiphany season. In addition, several of the readings refer in some way to the 'manifestation' of God to those beyond the Jewish world into which Jesus was born. Indeed, the lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer even provides a heading for the season which reads: 'The Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles'.

The reading for the Feast-day itself is, of course, the story of the Magi. There is no doubt that this is a manifestation and a recognition on more levels than one: the place to which they travel is manifested by a star; they fall down and worship the Christ-child; and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh symbolically make manifest the kingship, priesthood and future sacrificial death of the baby they have come so far to see. In addition, of course, they are clearly gentiles, traveling from way beyond Judaea, and of an altogether different religion, probably to be imagined as coming from the great Persian Empire across the desert (a rival to the imperial Roman power then occupying Judaea), and most likely members of the Zoroastrian faith.

The BCP's next two Sunday lections don't actually concern themselves with gentiles (despite the over-all sub-title that the BCP provides for the season!). Rather, they demonstrate, or manifest, Jesus' divine wisdom in his debate at the age of twelve with the elders in the Temple, and his divine power in changing the water into wine at the Wedding Feast of Cana — the first miracle, and one full of prophetic eucharistic symbolism, as biblical commentators invariably pointed out.

For the third Sunday after Epiphany the gentile theme comes to the fore again in the story of how Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion, whose faith Jesus recognises in the words: 'I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel'. And again, manifestation to the gentiles is present in the lection for the fourth Sunday: the story of how, in the country of the Gergesenes or Gadarenes (a non-Jewish community) demons miraculously expelled by Jesus from the possessed inhabit swine, who then rush headlong into the sea. Not that the locals took kindly to this; they asked Jesus to leave.

The BCP's readings followed pre-Reformation practice. From a thematic point of view it's not difficult to see why, centuries earlier, these had become the established readings for the season, nor why the BCP continued with them. Nowadays the lectionary of Common Worship has three cycles of readings, for each of three years, and so the picture is more complicated. But these 'manifestation' stories are still there, along with others that pick up the theme just as effectively: for example, the baptism of Jesus; the spreading of Jesus' fame when he had performed a miracle in the synagogue; his prophetic words in a another synagogue that 'no prophet is accepted in his own country'; and the account of the Presentation in the Temple (also read at Candlemas) when Simeon recognises that the baby is 'a light to lighten the gentiles'. Look out for these themes as you hear the readings in the Season of Manifestation.