



Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany Romans 12:1-5 & St. Luke 2:41-52

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January 9, 2011 — Epiphany 1

When we were here together to celebrate Christ's Epiphany on Thursday evening I preached from that day's Old Testament lesson—from Isaiah 60—and we heard those words: "Arise, shine!" Why? "For your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." Epiphany is our annual celebration of and reminder that Jesus Christ has manifested himself to the world. The Light has come into the darkness. We've seen him and he has filled us with his light and made us lights ourselves. And now Epiphany calls us to go out into the darkness and shine. We need the reminder, because it's so easy to shut ourselves up with the light—to live in it and to love it ourselves—but to forget that that's only half of what the light is for. It gives us life, but we also need to carry that light to the world so that it can bring life to others. Too often we get lazy and we let our light grow dim. Sometime we fear what might happen if we take the light into the darkness—if we try to show it to others, so we hide it—we keep it to ourselves. Jesus knew this and that's why he told his disciples: Don't hide your light under a bushel basket. It won't do anyone any good there. No, take it out for all to see. Hold it high. Be like a city on a hill that shines its light for miles into the night's darkness. Epiphany reminds us that because Jesus manifested himself to us, we need to manifest his life in us to the world and the lessons that the Church has selected for the season show us the various ways he manifest Christ-in-us to the world, showing us our Christian duties, telling us how to show the world God's sympathy, mercy, power, and patience.

Our Gospel today, Luke 2:41-52, gives us the only information we have of Jesus as he was growing up. The Gospels tell us about his birth and they focus mostly on his ministry thirty years later, but here Luke gives us a look at this one event that happened when Jesus was twelve, and as he tells us about this trip that the Holy Family took to Jerusalem, he gives us a picture of Christian duty.

St. Luke tells us that when Jesus was twelve, Joseph and Mary took him with them to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. But Luke doesn't just say that they went this one time. He's also very clear to tell us, "His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover." Here and in other places, the Gospel writers make it clear that Joseph and Mary weren't the Jewish equivalent of "Christmas and Easter Christians". They weren't flaky church-goers. They didn't lack commitment to God's family or to his kingdom. The law was full of duties and obligations and Joseph and Mary fulfilled them. And they didn't fulfil them legalistically. The picture the Gospels present is of a couple who had experienced the goodness of God and desired to serve him in return—doing the things they knew would please him. Joseph and Mary knew their *duty*.

So Luke tells us that they went to Jerusalem for the Passover and then went home, but on the way home they had a problem. They were travelling in a group with their friends and family. When they left Jerusalem, they assumed that Jesus was with them, but when he didn't turn up for dinner at the end of the day, they went looking for him and he was nowhere to be found. You can imagine how panicked they must have been. Imagine if you were in that situation and your kid turned up missing. So the two of them turned around and went back to Jerusalem and scoured the city all day. We can only speculate about what they thought he might be up to. If I were in their shoes, I'd probably be afraid that he'd been kidnapped and might be dead somewhere. They no doubt searched the market places, talked to the Roman and Herodian soldiers who policed the city, and probably tracked down other kids to ask them if they'd seen Jesus. Finally, Luke says that they went to the temple and there they found Jesus sitting with the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. Luke writes:

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. (Luke 2:46-50)

Jesus knew what his priorities were. There's no indication that he was being rebellious in hanging back in Jerusalem. We don't know his motives for certain. He may have become so consumed with this desire to learn the things of God that he simply lost track of time, but it's also entirely possible that he intended to teach Mary and Joseph something about his divinity. Whatever the case, God used the situation to teach—both Mary and Joseph *and us*.

At twelve, Jesus knew that he was God's Son and he knew in some sense that he was here on a divine mission, and so on what was probably his first opportunity to go to Jerusalem and to the temple—his first opportunity to sit at the feet of the teachers and rabbis to learn about his own Father and his own mission as the Messiah—he submitted himself to their wisdom and their teaching. He knew that his first priority in life was his Father. In fact, this is the question he asks his parents. They'd been no doubt panicking all day, searching everywhere, and Jesus doesn't understand why. He asks them: Why were you looking for me? Doesn't it make sense that I would be in my Father's house? Why didn't you just come here first?

These are the first words of Jesus that we have recorded for us: "I must be in my Father's house." Compare those to his last words as he died for us on the Cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." From his birth to his death, Jesus was not only devoted to his Father, but manifesting him and pointing the world to him. He knew his *duty*.

After that Luke tells us that "he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to his them" (Luke 2:51). Jesus knew his duty to his Father, but he also knew his duty to his earthly parents. His staying back at the temple wasn't an act of rebellion against his parents in any way, but an act showing his devotion to his heavenly Father. In every way he submitted himself to the duty of obeying Joseph and Mary. We've all known some Christians who seem to have forgotten their earthly obligations. We have a phrase to describe them: "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." That wasn't Jesus. He came as one of us and he truly lived as one of us. He submitted himself to God's law, he submitted himself to his parents, and he submitted himself to the general obligations of earthly life. Before he became the Saviour, he became a carpenter. He consecrated his earthly life to God by fulfilling its obligations.

Finally, St. Luke tells us in verse 52: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in

favor with God and man.” He spent thirty years in private, just being a regular guy and an average Joe, but he did that to prepare himself for three years of ministry. The Son of God didn’t turn up his nose at living on the wrong side of the tracks or being a child born out of wedlock, or at having to earn a living getting dirty and working with his hands. We can learn a lesson from that. How often do we forget that Jesus consecrated earthly life and work and suffering simply by submitting to it? We somehow get the idea that to do great things for God, we have to give up our earthly work or earthly families and go off to some far away place to be a missionary or we have to be ordained and become a full-time minister. Some people are called to that, but most of us are simply called to submit to the people and work God has called us to—to work for him right where he’s put us. That’s what the Incarnation is all about. Jesus became one of us that we might be one with him. He consecrated earthly things to heavenly use and we need to remember to do the same.

And this is where we cross into our Epistle from Romans today. St. Luke shows us how Jesus manifested himself in the ordinary things of life and now St. Paul reminds us that we need to do the same. If you’ve got your Bible, turn to Romans 12. Paul tells us starting in verse 1:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

That’s our Christian duty at its most basic: present our bodies—ourselves—as living sacrifices to God. But it’s not just “duty”. Sometimes “duty” has negative connotations for us. Consider that Paul says that this is our “worship”. We get hung up thinking that coming and singing and hearing the Scriptures read and receiving the Sacraments is worship, but those things are only one small part of worship. The most basic and the most essential act of worship we can offer is to give ourselves over to God. Think about everything we just read in the Gospel about Jesus in that light. He presented himself as a living sacrifice to God. Even before he offered himself on the Cross as the once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sins, he offered himself to his Father. The worship we offer to God here on Sundays is the fruit of our offering God our whole selves the whole rest of the week as an act of worship and then as we’re refreshed here by the Scriptures, by the Sacrament, and by our fellowship, we go back out into the world to

offer ourselves again for another week—to engage ourselves in another week of real-life worship.

But we also have to ask ourselves why we offer ourselves in worship to God. In the Gospel we saw Joseph and Mary fulfilling the obligations and duties of the law—worshipping—submitting to the things they knew were pleasing to God and being faithful in doing them—things like travelling to Jerusalem every year for the Passover. The Scriptures lay out for us the things that are pleasing to God—all his rules and regulations, his precepts and commandments. We know these are the things God’s wants us to do. But it’s easy to fall into the trap of doing them—of submitting ourselves to God—for the wrong reasons. Christians have always struggled with legalism. And let me be clear what that is, because Christians throw that term around a lot without really knowing what it means. Legalism is simply the belief that we are saved by keeping the law—that we’re saved by “doing” “things”. We live in an age where many Christians have abandoned the law for the most part and look on any attempt by the Church to exercise discipline or to hold her members accountable as “legalistic”. Friends, that’s not legalism. Whether it’s a preacher telling us what we should or shouldn’t do or brothers and sisters exhorting us to do good or offering correction when we fall into sin, that’s not legalism. *Legalism is falling into the belief that our salvation depends on the things we do.* The Church’s discipline and teaching and exhortation is not to tell us how to earn our salvation; it’s to give us a clear picture of what it looks like to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God—to worship him by doing the things that Scripture tells us are pleasing to him and avoiding the things Scripture tells us are displeasing to him. Walking in God’s way, living in a way that is pleasing to him, offering ourselves as living sacrifices, living righteously and avoiding sin—all that is the evidence of a true and saving faith, because the one who has experienced the loving grace of God will *always* have an overwhelming desire love God in return—to give him our worship. This is what St. James is getting at when he says that we ought to show our faith through our works. Works will never save, but saving faith will always show itself in works, because saving faith desires to please the God who has saved us. The Church and Scriptures are here in part to teach us what those works should be and the corrective discipline of the Church is meant to give us a kick in the pants when by our works we’re demonstrating a love for the world or for

ourselves instead of a love of God—when our works seem to suggest that we don’t have saving faith. It’s not meant to punish, but to correct—to ensure the Church has a pure witness while at the same time forcing us to ask: Am I truly saved or have I deceived myself?

In contrast to legalism, St. Paul tells us here that the real motive for offering ourselves to God is a sense of “the mercies of God.” Melville Scott put it this way: “We are to act from the motive of love; not our love which is so weak, but from the realisation of God’s great love towards us. Duty is not the price to purchase love, but a thank-offering for love received; not a thing of dreary necessity, but of gladness, its only sorrow being its own imperfection.” When you think of being a living sacrifice, think of Jesus. He humbled himself and he submitted himself to the will of his Father and he did that out of love for his Father and out of love for his people. We ought to humbly submit ourselves to the will of the Father out of love and gratitude for what he’s done for us in Christ and as we follow the example of Jesus, that means we also humbly submit ourselves to the service of our brothers and sisters out of love too.

But as we’re called to be living sacrifices, how do we know what that looks like. We’ve already touched on that a bit. In verse 2 Paul says:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Being worldly is not being a living sacrifice to God—in fact, being worldly is the opposite of what we’re called to be. Paul calls us to actively renew our minds. The indwelling Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts, turning our desires away from the things of the world and focusing them on the things of God, but that’s only half of what happens to us when we become Christians. That’s the “justification” part. We’re also to be sanctified—that ongoing work of the Spirit that makes us holy and like Christ. The Spirit inclines our hearts toward holiness, but we need to actively renew our minds. Our minds have been fed on the things of the world. As Christians we now need to feed our minds on the things of God. We need to take worldly minds and give them a Christian formation and we do that first and foremost as we feed on the Spirit-inspired Word—that’s where we find the will of God and the better we know the

Word the better we will be able to submit ourselves to God's will—the better we will be able to put ourselves on his altar as living sacrifices.

It should go without saying that if we're offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices out of gratitude for his loving mercy, that we should do so in all humility. And yet just as we're prone to falling into legalism and submitting ourselves to God in order to earn his mercy, we're also prone to twisting our submission into something in which to take pride: "Look at me! I'm such a good living sacrifice!" or "My offering to God is better than yours!" And so Paul goes on in verses 3 to 5:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

The Christian life is a life of humility. There's no "Look at me!" in the body of Christ. There's no "I'm better than you!" or "I'm holier than you!" in the Church. And in the Church we never do anything self-serving. Think of Jesus' example. He gave up everything. He humbled himself to become one of us. And as if God becoming man wasn't humbling enough, he who knew no sin took our sins upon himself and died the death we deserve. And so Paul reminds us that living sacrifices offer themselves to God and to their brothers and sisters in Christ. A living sacrifice knows that he's only holy based on the merit of Jesus and by the grace of God, and so he never lords what he has in Christ over what another has. We offer ourselves in humility.

The Roman Church had some of the same problems that the Corinthian Church had. They saw diversity in the body and some took that to mean that they were better than others or that their gifts were more important. Paul reminds us that God gifts us all differently and that those different gifts are meant to compliment each other. Just as Jesus was faithful in doing the work that was set before him, whether that was sawing lumber in a carpenter's shop or being nailed to a cross, no one of us is above the work that God has given us and no one is to look down on the sanctified work of his brother or sister. All the work of the Church is

God's work, all of it is to build up the body and all of it is to build the kingdom.

Think about these things as we come to the Lord's Table this morning. What we do here, as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we do in obedience to his commandment: "Do this in remembrance of me, your Saviour and Redeemer. This is a reminder not to forget that you belong to me. I have bought you with a price. You belong not to yourself. You were bought with my blood and you belong to me." Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." He reminds us that his work on earth in his name is as much ours as the work that he did for his Father. And that means that he expects the same devotion to our work that he gave to his own work—the same kind of devotion and passion we see throughout his life in the gospels.

Think of how fully he gave himself to the work he was sent to do. He told his disciples, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." His whole life was to do the work that his Father gave him: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." At the end of his life he could say to his Father, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work you gave me to do."

We need to be reminded that our Lord expects his followers—you and me—to have the kind of devotion to the Father's work that he did. As he gave his life, so we must dedicate your lives to God and to his kingdom. We're prone to forgetting God's purpose for us. We start thinking that earning a living is our life's purpose, when it's really a means to the end of serving the Lord. Don't waste what God had given you. Follow Jesus' example and sanctify your work—offer it to God—whether it's raising children or building houses or excavating or teaching in our schools. Do it for God and make it an opportunity to "arise and shine". To show Christ-in-you to the world.

As you come to the Table today, remember that here we confess that Jesus has bought us with his body and blood and that he calls us to a life of service. Ask yourself what you're doing for him and what you can do for him. Paul tells us, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." In our Epistle today he said, "As in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." We are one in the body of Christ, and we are

Christ's body. Any body that has inactive, useless, dead members is crippled and deformed. Brothers and sisters, God had placed every one of us here for a reason. He's give us all the parts we need to do his work and when and as he calls us to other work, he'll give us the gifts and the people to do that work too. Let us not waste the gifts he's given. Let us not miss out on the work he's called us to do. As you come to the Table this morning—as you eat and drink in remembrance of Jesus who gave us his own body and blood, remember not to forget his love and devotion to God's cause. Let him strengthen you for the work of his kingdom as he fills you with his grace.

And so we pray: "Merciful Lord, receive the prayers of your people who call upon you and grant that we may know those things we ought to do and also have the grace and power faithfully to perform them, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."