



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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They Will Bring the Glory and Honour of the Nations

**Ephesians 3:1-12 &
St. Matthew 2:1-12**

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Epiphany otherwise known as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. On Christmas we read about the birth of Jesus. We read about the angels visiting the shepherds with their announcement about a baby in a manger. We read about the angel's announcement of glad tidings and of peace and joy. And we read about the shepherds—poor and unclean outsiders, but still Jewish men—going to worship Jesus. Jesus came to preach good news to the poor in Israel and we see a foretaste of his ministry in the announcement to those shepherds and we see a foretaste of its results as they seek him out to worship him. But even if Jesus' mission was first and foremost to Israel, it went well beyond that. Jesus wasn't just born the king of the Jews, he was born to reign over all of creation—Jews and Gentiles alike. And this aspect of his ministry and of his person is foreshadowed in the visit of the wise men, these "kings" from the East bringing gifts—gifts acknowledging his kingship—and coming to worship him.

We read again of Gentile kings bringing gifts and coming to worship King Jesus in Revelation 21. St. John writes near the end of his vision, after he had seen the New Jerusalem descending to earth, this great city whose gates are named after the tribes of Israel and whose foundation is the apostles—this city is the people, the Church of God—with the Lamb, with Jesus at its centre:

By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the

glory and the honor of the nations.
(Revelation 21:24-26)

The whole earth—represented by the kings of the nations—comes to worship the Lamb, just as these kings came to Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But how do we get from Bethlehem to the New Jerusalem. How do we get from the wise men to the kings of the earth coming to worship Jesus? St. Paul shows us in our Epistle from Ephesians.

Before the gentile kings come to Jesus, the gentiles themselves have to come. In our lessons this past Sunday we also read from Matthew 2 and we focused on the Old Testament prophecies that Matthew applied to Jesus. We read the prophecy of Isaiah about a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse—a branch that would bear fruit. Matthew reminds us of the state of Israel when Jesus came. The tree that had grown from Jesse had failed to bear the fruit God intended for her to bear and so he laid his axe to it. He cut it down. He chopped off the dead wood, the branches that were failing to bear fruit. And just when it looked like the stump was to be left to rot, a fresh shoot grew out of it. This was Jesus. As we read, in him the promises to Israel and Israel's mission itself were fulfilled. She was called to be a light to the world and where the old Israel had kept that light to herself, Jesus took it where everyone could see it and where everyone could be drawn to it. In the book of Acts we see how the light went out through the witness of the early Jewish Church, from Judea, to the Samaritans, and then to the Gentile nations. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians the light had spread all the way to Rome and beyond. The nations, the gentiles were being transformed by the light. As the dead wood of Israel, pruned off the tree, was being grafted back into the living branch, so the dead wood of the gentiles—wood that had never even been part of the tree—was being grafted in too.

This is what the first chapters of Ephesians are about. In Ephesians 2 Paul writes reminds his readers that the gentiles were once cut off from the

covenant and from the promises of God. They were uncircumcised. But, he stresses, Jesus fulfilled the Law. He has become circumcision for us—for Jews and gentile alike. And so, he writes, the two have become one. In 2:17-22 he writes:

He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

The imagery here is wonderful—and it would have been blasphemy to say these things just a few decades before. Gentiles, not being circumcised, not following the Law, not being covered by the temple's sacrifices, were unclean—they couldn't even enter the temple. And yet in Jesus a new temple has been built and it's being built of those from near—Jews—and those from far away—gentiles. And the gentiles aren't second class building materials. They aren't an afterthought. All alike are like carefully cut stones, being carefully joined together in this new dwelling place for God.

And so, in our passage from Chapter 3, Paul emphasizes that this was God's plan all along. This is the plan he is now making known and it's the plan that Paul himself has been given the task of making known. He acknowledges that it all sounds strange. How can unclean gentiles be incorporated into a temple for the God of Israel? How could that have possibly been the plan from the beginning? And yet it's there. All the way back in Genesis 3, right after Adam and Eve had sinned for the first time, back before there was a distinction between Jew and gentile, the Lord had promised redemption and restoration. A Messiah would come to deal a deal blow to the serpent and to set all Creation to

rights—not just for Jews, but for all humanity. Abraham was told that he would be blessed and his children, Israel, were told that they would be blessed too, but Abraham and Israel were to be blessed *so that* they would then be blessing to the nations. The prophets, especially Isaiah, get at this over and over.

The problem was that Israel had taken God's promise of blessing to mean that she was his favourite. But, Brothers and Sisters, the Lord has no favourites. That he chose Israel didn't mean that she was his favourite or that he despised the gentiles. He chose Israel as a starting point. Through her he would restore all humanity to himself. And it was Jesus who set all this straight and who set God's plan back on track. He showed Israel what it really meant to keep God's Law. The Law wasn't meant to be a way to condemn the gentiles, but instead, it was meant to be the means by which they were light to the gentiles. Israel put her light under a basket. Jesus put it back on the hilltop for everyone to see. This, Paul says in verse 5, is what was made known to the apostles by the Holy Spirit. It's the message he, in particular, was given to carry to the gentiles. And so he says in verse 6:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The gentiles, through faith in Jesus, are made fellow—*equal*—heirs of the inheritance that was promised to Abraham and his children. We've been grafted, adopted into his family and everything that was promised to him now belongs to us. Jew and gentiles alike are, in Christ, members of *one* body. And it's through the gospel, he says. It is through the Good News that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom has come.

And that leads Paul to remind the Ephesians and to remind us of the mission of the Church. In verses 8-10 he writes:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Again, Paul's mission is to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Jesus and to shine his light brightly so that they can see it. And yet he also says that another part of his mission is to preach that *it is through the Church* that the wisdom of God is to be made known to the rulers and authorities. We wonder how the vision of John in Revelation—the vision of the kings of the nations coming to the New Jerusalem to worship the Lamb—we wonder how that can possibly ever happen. The Christians in the First Century would have wondered the same thing. How will a Caesar or a Herod ever acknowledge that Jesus is Lord? The "creed" of the Roman empire was that Caesar is Lord and the same has been true down through the ages of almost every empire and nation in one way or another.

The answer is that the Church is to make known the wisdom of God. And Paul stresses here that we do this not only through our bold proclamation that Jesus is Lord, that he is the world's true sovereign and that his kingdom has arrived, but we make known the wisdom of God by simply *being* the Church as Paul has described it here. First, the Church doesn't just preach that Jesus is Lord; she's called to live it. That means living in faith, holding on to Jesus with everything she's got, and trusting in Jesus even when it means refusing to bow to earthly kings and empires, even when it means rejection or martyrdom.

But, second, it means exposing earthly kings and empires with the light of Jesus and his kingdom—by our very nature as the Church. The kings of the earth establish and build their nations by force. The kings of the earth establish

societies that are monochrome and uniform. They marginalise anyone who doesn't fit the mould. They consolidate power by instilling fear and hatred of outsiders. There's always got to be someone or some group to fear and hate, some group we have to go to war against, whether it's the nation next door or across the world. Today it's Middle Easterners and Muslims. In my own country it's immigrants from Latin America. A century ago it was Asians. A few decades before that it was southern Europeans. It's the way of earthly empire. But Paul says that by her very nature, the Church exposes the nations. Rather than each group waging war against another, in the Church all find peace in Jesus, the world's true Lord. It's not without reason that in Revelation John repeatedly tells the reader that the heavenly throng is made up of people from every tribe and nation, from every people and tongue in contrast to the nations of the earth. Brothers and Sisters, by our very nature, we the Church proclaim to earthly kings that their time is up. By our very nature, we the Church call the nations to repentance for the kingdom of God is at hand.

Dear friends, we are the New Israel in Jesus—the people with whom God has made peace and the people drawn from every tribe and nation between whom God has also made peace. Paul stresses that it is our mission to live as this people, unified by the lordship of Jesus, living in grace and love and peace and hope. And it is as we do so that that the nations will see Jesus, will come to know him. It is through our witness that the Spirit will work to bring the kings of the earth to a knowledge of God's wisdom and we can live in a hope-filled faith knowing that in time they too will come to faith and the world will be set to rights. Instead of making war, the kings of the earth will come like the wise men to worship the true King: Jesus.