

“Us and Them”

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In Christ there is no “us and them.” We are all one. Isaiah foresees the whole world streaming to Jerusalem. “Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance (Isaiah 60: 16).” Today’s psalm chimes in: “Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.” St. Paul rejoices that the Gentiles are coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body (Ephesians 3: 2-6). Epiphany’s revelation is that our gracious God is intent upon enlarging the chosen people to include everyone. The beautiful star of the Magi portrays the theme of universality; kings from afar come to adore the lowly infant (Matthew 2: 1-12). In Christ there is no “us and them.”

The world hums by a different dynamic, division rather than harmony, insiders versus outsiders, Republicans versus Democrats, liberals versus conservatives, Christians versus Muslims, whites versus blacks, capitalists versus socialists. Epiphany holds up the dream – the revelation – of cooperation rather than competition, harmony rather than dissonance, survival of the unfit and not just the fit, of building bridges rather than borders, of sharing abundance so there are no have-nots, of universal health care, universal peace, universal salvation.

Such was the intent of the garden of Eden, God’s purpose for the world. But he gifted us with free will, with the freedom not to choose to live by his purpose. We have been paying for it ever since. God’s vision is broad, not narrow, certainly not tunnel vision. God’s preference is to enlarge the spirit of welcome, not to narrow it. Such is the meaning of Epiphany, the revelation this feast celebrates.

Most of us grew up in a different environment. From a religious point of view, we grew up believing we were the only ones that mattered. We were the chosen people. We interpreted narrowly the medieval theological adage that “outside the church there is no salvation.” Protestants were wrong, Catholics were right. This was a convenient way to believe. You avoided having to deal with doubts.

Where I grew up, you were either Lutheran or Catholic. Scandinavians were Lutheran, Irish descendants were Catholic. In my own heritage, I was both, with a Protestant Scandinavian father and an Irish Catholic mother. What seemed a disadvantage then proved to be a blessing in disguise. While my mother saw to it that I was raised a staunch Catholic, I never shared a negative view of Protestants. I treasured the fact that our pastor, too, Father Alex Merth, had an ecumenical outlook in his relations with non-Catholics in our community.

Come back to Jesus' time. Imagine what Jewish folks in Jerusalem might have been thinking when they heard the same news that Herod received: a newborn king has been born in Bethlehem. "He's one of us, the chosen people!" Surely, they would have begun to flock to Bethlehem to celebrate that great event.

In his infancy story, St. Luke speaks only of shepherds coming to visit the Christ child. St. Matthew audaciously records that the only visitors were pagan foreigners, non-Jews. They were not the chosen people. They knew nothing of God. But they were searching for the truth. They were guided by a light above at a great expense and cost and time to themselves. A philosophy of "us and them" was foreign to their thinking.

Admittedly, this is a different interpretation of the conventional story of Epiphany, the story of a great revelation. I have added a surprise dimension to that story. I offer it simply to reinforce the conviction that in Christ, indeed, there is no "us and them."

In a lighter vein, consider a different kind of Epiphany story with its own revelation. I have treasured this story for many years. The story relates to the Amish tradition in America, one of my favorite non-Catholic religious traditions. I love the Amish's deeply family-centered community spirit, and I relish its rock-bed simplicity and survival in the face of questionable technological advances in the dominant culture. The story portrays the Amish tradition very well; I have found it enjoyable and pertinent to this Epiphany season and to my own resistance to learning and complying with technological innovations in our culture.

An Amish family from northwestern Ohio was visiting relatives near the big city of Columbus, where I used to live. One day, the family was touring down-town Columbus and grandfather Edgar and grandson Joel happened to get detached from the group. Grandpa and grandson strolled into the Sheraton Hotel and were amazed at the elaborate furnishings in the hotel foyer. They seemed breathless at almost everything they saw, but especially two shiny, silver walls that could move apart and then slide back together again. Joel asked his grandpa, "What is this, grandpa?" Edgar responded, "Joel, I have never seen anything like this in my life; I don't know what it is."

While the boy and his grandfather were watching with amazement, a large older lady walking with the aid of a cane made her way up to the moving walls and pressed a button. The walls opened and the lady hobbled between them into a small room. The walls closed and the boy and his grandfather watched the small circular numbers above the walls light up sequentially. They continued to watch until the light reached the last number, and then the numbers began to light up in reverse order. Finally, the walls opened up again and out stepped a beautiful, well-dressed, woman in her thirties. At that point, the grandfather said quietly to Joel, "Son, go get your grandma."

We would all like to be transformed. Transformation is the goal of this Christmas/Epiphany season. The whole point of the Incarnation of the Son of God was to transform a broken world, to make it new again, to teach people that God's purpose is to help us realize that we are all one. In Christ there is no "us and them." This revelation is different from yet akin to the transformation Edgar and his grandson witnessed at the Sheraton Hotel in Columbus.