

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 2006

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The gospel today (John 2:1f.) ends by telling us, “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee.” The King James version gives a slightly misleading translation. The proper word is not “miracle” but “sign.” Turning water into wine was the beginning of the signs through which Jesus manifested forth his glory.

Turning water into wine is certainly miraculous. But the point is not the miracle, per se. If the point were the miracle, the conclusion would be, “Let’s invite Jesus to every wedding.” The miracle was a sign that pointed to something more important. If Jesus turned water into wine, then he must have the power to create. He must be the Creator.

God reveals himself to us through signs that point to his presence. The magi were led to Christ by a star, which was for them a sign. The shepherds to whom the angels appeared were told, “This shall be a sign for you. You shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

When God commanded Moses to perform miracles in the presence of Pharaoh, the Bible calls them signs. God told Moses the purpose of the miracles was, “That you may tell...your son and your son's son...what signs I have done among [the Egyptians] that you may know that I am the LORD.” The signs revealed that the God of Israel was the one true God.

Now, God gives each one of us signs to lead us to faith. Sometimes it is a miracle of healing or of God’s provision that comes in response to prayer. Sometimes the sign is a coincidental occurrence; things turn out in a strangely propitious manner that makes us aware of the presence and power of God.

Romans tells us that the creation itself is a sign of God’s presence. Romans 1:20 says, “Since the creation of the world, [God’s] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” This is true not only for the one who can see God in the visible beauty of nature. This is also true for the scientist, who can see God’s hand in the complex and ordered design of the creation.

The processes of nature are themselves in a sense miraculous signs. St. Augustine once observed that people look for some small miracle and miss the big miracle: God’s day-by-day ordering of the universe. Turning water into wine is a natural process. The rain comes down, is sucked up into the vines and turns into grapes. The grapes are crushed and the juice fermented to become wine. At Cana, Jesus expedited this natural process.

The growth of a child in the womb and the growth of a tree from a seed are both miraculous, but we see them as normal because they recur. We would see them as miraculous if a child were born in three months or a full grown eucalyptus appeared in a year. However, since nine months pregnancies and slow growing trees are normal, we miss the miracle involved in the beginning and growth of all life. The phenomena of birth and growth are signs that point to God.

Talk of signs leads us to the sacraments. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces. In sacraments there are things we see that point to and convey realities we can't see. The water of baptism is a sign of spiritual rebirth. The bread and wine are signs of the body and blood of Jesus. A miracle occurs every time we celebrate the Eucharist. Ordinary bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ by virtue of prayer. It is an ordinary but miraculous process. Faith sees the reality conveyed by the signs.

The principle signs of Christ's presence are ordinary things. We see Christ in the sign of seemingly ordinary bread and wine. We see Christ in the sign of ordinary people who, as members of the Body of Christ, minister to us with their gifts. We see Christ in the sign of the needy. As Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

To be spiritually blind is to see the signs and to perceive nothing more than the signs; to see the miracles of nature and the incredible vastness and grandeur of creation and be nothing more than a nature lover; to experience the gift of life and love but be nothing more than a pleasure seeker. To be spiritually blind is to see the sacramental signs and understand nothing more than external religious duty; to see the brethren and the needy and only recognize flesh and blood.

We might ask, Why does God use signs? Why does he not just show up in person with irrefutable proof? To ask these questions is to misidentify the problem. The problem is not that God is hidden; the problem is that we cannot see.

Before the Fall, man saw. Man had the vision to see the grace that was inherent in the creation. Man had the vision to see angels. Man had the understanding to perceive the deeper meaning of the visible world, to see God in things that God had made. The inability to perceive the true meaning of the sign is a result of the spiritual blindness that is caused by sin.

We are told that Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. We understand this to mean also that Jesus heals our spiritual blindness. As we are told in Luke's gospel, "[Jesus] opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (24:45). St. Paul offered a prayer in Ephesians that "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened...you may know what is the hope of your calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (1:18).

Epiphany is about Jesus being revealed to us and our response to that revelation. Today's gospel teaches us that Jesus reveals himself through signs that point us to him. Genuine faith is the ability to perceive the meaning of signs. At Cana, Christ gave the disciples a sign; he manifested forth his glory and the disciples believed.

If we have doubts, we can ask God to give us a sign—to manifest forth the glory of Christ in our lives—to lead us to greater faith. Or, we can pray that God will open our eyes, that God will cure our spiritual blindness so that we might perceive the many signs of the glory of Christ that surround us each day—and that seeing, we might believe.