

The Politics of Epiphany

Co-Missioners,

We send along a piece of commentary by our editor. “Unfinished,” he calls it, and for several reasons. Feedback is welcome.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community



The Politics of Epiphany

by Jerome Burce

Many years ago I imagined the Word of God working on me the way a stream of water works on a piece of granite. It takes a while to leave an impression; a much longer while before the naked, mortal eye can spot the impression it's making.

So too, methinks, for most other baptized Christians who were likewise born with heads and hearts composed of "the old flesh," as Luther calls it. Tough stuff, it is—about as amenable to shaping as a hunk of hard rock. Nowhere does this seem truer than in the matter of our politics, here defined as the way we combine to express our deepest instincts, values, and loyalties, with an emphasis on the last of these. If America's madness in this moment of Trump exposes anything at all, it's the failure of Christians across the board to take their own peculiar politics with the seriousness it demands and deserves—enough seriousness, that is, to practice it consistently among themselves and then to push it in their broader world as God's

brehtaking gift for everybody. Times like these confront the sinner-saint with two fundamental options. We can revel with neighbors in the daily rage-and-fear fest; or we can stand with Christ, exhibiting the weird and wondrous glory of his way with sinners of every type, not least our own type. The former seems more and more to be the option that most of us are seizing. The latter carries a price—scorn and derision, if nothing more—and really, who wants that? Not Old Adam or Old Eve, for whom ignominy is never an option.

Enter then the stubborn, indefatigable Word, gushing from the heart of God and pounding down on the stony hearts of any who persist in going to church, especially in places that stick to the old liturgical calendar. We're in the weeks of Epiphany right now. What this entails, I submit, is yet another extended soak in God's own New Age politics. Come the questions: will this finally leave that long-sought impression, however faint, on my heart? On yours? And dare I be gloomy about this?

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A word about Epiphany and my present take on it:

The season as a whole is anchored in the recollection of a political act—overt, defiant, enraging. Some well-heeled strangers bounce into Bethlehem. They knock on Joseph and Mary's door. On seeing the child within, they pledge their fealty to it in the classic fashion of the ancient Near East. This entails the physical gesture of flopping face down on the floor and a subsequent presentation of lavish gifts. Translation: "Here is my Leader, the One worth groveling to, the One I hereafter obey and support and entrust my future to." That the onlookers grasp what the show signifies, we can take for granted; also that every one of them, mother and father included, is standing there slack-jawed, wondering what on earth these plutocrats have been sucking through their hookah pipes during those long nights out

in the desert. Back in Jerusalem, Herod grinds his fangs. Nothing aggravates a tyrant more than a stranger's failure to grovel to him. His nose twitches too. Political animal that he is—crafty, ruthless—he sniffs rebellion in the offing and lays plans to expunge it now. The strangers dodge him on their way home. The account attributes this to a God-given dream. One can't help but think that they'd have dodged anyway. They are magi, after all—wise ones, in our English translations—and it can't have taken that many smarts to grasp that Herod isn't the guy to be checking back with right now, not when you've just made so big a show of pledging fealty on his turf to someone other than him.

And with this as a theme statement, Matthew launches the Gospel we're listening to this year. To use his own incessant terminology, it's the good news of "the kingdom of heaven," Christians parrot that line to this day, or at least some do, invariably forgetting that in doing so they're playing with political dynamite. It's not for nothing that subsequent powers picked up the ball Herod dropped and got Jesus killed. Not that this stopped God from having God's way, which is Matthew's driving point. As in the end, so even now: Jesus rules. His is the crucified and resurrected face of the politics God prefers.

Among the ways Matthew makes this point is by an incessant quoting of the Old Testament scriptures, where politics—the arrangements that either are or ought to be in place between nations, between the rulers and the ruled, between the Lord and the Lord's subjects—are continually front and center. See, for example, Matthew's quote at the end of Chapter One as he reports on Jesus' birth. "All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet." There follows a snippet from Isaiah 7, where the prophet is pushing Ahaz, king of Judah, to scrap his own political instincts in favor of trusting God to save the nation. "Thus Jesus," Matthew asserts, in what quickly

establishes itself as a document-long advertisement of this unlikely child—son of Mary by the Holy Spirit—as God’s best and final answer to Israel’s deepest aspirations, bubbling and stewing for centuries. At their heart lie aches of an essentially political nature: for a ruler both strong and good; for peace, prosperity, and pervasive justice; for neighbors who behave themselves; for prominence and respect among the nations; for enemies cowed and controlled; for whatever it takes to make life long and happy not merely for the few, but for the many.

“These are your hopes,” says Matthew. “Here is your guy.” More to the point, here is God’s guy, the answer not only to Israel’s prayers, but to those of people anywhere who have ever thought to yearn and beg for an alternative to the politics of sinners. Slaves in the cotton field come suddenly to mind, perhaps because I’ve just been listening to an account of America’s horrendous politics in the 1850’s, the decade that ended with secession and civil war.

Epiphany as a whole crackles with political implication. From the magi’s obeisance to the newborn Ruler, we move to the Father’s approbation of a Son still dripping with the dirty water of a Jordan that crowds of low-life sinners have been washed in first (Matt. 3:17). Then we jump to Andrew’s excitement: “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn. 1:41), which, if read in its first century context, is as political a claim as ever there was. Next we catch Jesus himself going to work with a command to “Repent!” Why? “For the kingdom of heaven has come near,” emphasis here on “kingdom” (Matt. 4:17). On its heels come successive excerpts from Matthew 5, the opening salvo of the Sermon on the Mount. Suddenly that prior call to repent makes complete sense, repentance being understood as a thorough reorientation of assumption and attitude so as to fall in line with a new regime that “is not of this cosmos,” as Jesus will later say to Pilate (Jn. 18:36). It flies in the teeth of the

way the cosmos works. In Lutheran lingo, it is not driven by law, but impelled by Gospel. It calls for an alien righteousness, exceeding that of those experts in familiar righteousness, the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:18). It treasures “the last, the lost, the least, and the little,” to crib from Robert Capon.[1] It pulls the mighty off their thrones and exalts the lowly, as Mary sings (Lk. 1). Or as the Ruler puts it himself, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—the tail-draggers, one might say. Blessed too the mourners, the meek, the inept and deficient who crave a righteousness—a degree of “enoughness,” as David Zahl calls it [2] —that lies beyond their own achieving (Mt. 5:3-6). Such as these are in the money, says Jesus. What they need, the new regime will deliver (Mt. 5:3-6). Not so the delivery systems that run on standard cosmic politics. These can’t help but treat such people, to one degree or another, as burdensome pests. They soon give up on them as hopeless causes. At some point they write them off as dead. When Epiphany types step in to countermand such treatment, they catch it in the neck as Jesus predicts. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you *on my account* (Mt. 5:11, emphasis added). The career of Martin Luther King, Jr.—his holiday a mere four days ago, unwittingly sited in Epiphany—bears witness to that. So do the sufferings of many others whose commemorations sprinkle our annual church calendars.

I speak of “Epiphany types.” What binds them together and marks them as distinct is their pedigree as living heirs of the Magi tradition. They too have flopped in front of Jesus. They call him Lord. They confess this openly in deeds that match their words. They love their enemies. They



do good to those who persecute them, or, these days, abuse them on Facebook. This assumes, of course, that they've had the nerve to stick their necks out far enough to catch such abuse. Some refer to themselves as "followers of Jesus." I wish more would start to go whole hog with Paul and flaunt the label "slave of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:1); but whether labeled so or not, their loyalty attaches first, last, and above all to him. With Christ in view and for his renown, they slog against the tide of "politics as usual," as in the standard cosmic stuff. This they flout and subvert with a stubborn, incessant practice of their new -regime habits which manage now and then to add some counteracting flavor and a dash of relief to the rancid taste of the world as we know it. "You are the salt of the earth," as their Lord and Master tells them (Matt. 5:13). They take that seriously. They work together to push his wild program. For a fast review of how wild the program is—how wonderful too—read that Sermon on the Mount from beginning to end. Notice along the way that whenever Jesus touches on the habits of "the Gentiles" (Matt. 5:47, 6:7, 6:32) or "the hypocrites" (6:2, 5, 15; 7:5), or starts a line with "You have heard it said" (Matt. 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43), we're hearing his commentary on the deficiencies of those standard cosmic politics that all of us are inured to and sorely tempted to stick with. Don't miss those bits, so relevant to our present American moment, about not judging or hurling insults (Matt. 7:1; 5:22). Patience, forbearance, forgiveness as required, a readiness to love sinners however odious: these are the hallmarks of the new regime. They are not, will not, and cannot be popular. So be it, says Jesus. These are *your* politics, *your* ways of working together to shed light in the world (Matt. 5:16). Take them up. Bear your cross.

Students of Ed Schroeder still talk of "the double-dipstick test," their teacher's proposal, cribbed from Philip Melanchthon, for how to distinguish real Gospel from the fake

stuff. Dipstick 1: does the troubled conscience find comfort?
Dipstick 2: does Christ get the glory?

I propose a triple-dipstick for Epiphany politics, active and in play. Dipstick 1: are the lost and least the center of attention, with first dibs on whatever goodies the system is dishing out? Dipstick 2: is Christ crucified getting the credit for making this happen? Dipstick 3: is Herod getting mad? Are the muckety-mucks of our standard, old-style politics grinding their teeth and laying plans to squelch those Jesus-rascals who refuse to bend the knee to their power-hugging ways? Here it's worth bearing in mind that those muckety-mucks run churches too. "We have met the enemy, and he is us," to crib from Walt Kelly. (if you're too young to know who Walt Kelly is, check with Mr. Google.)

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I can't suppose that anything I've written so far comes as any surprise to Thursday Theology readers. You know the Scriptures as well as I do. You treasure the Gospel. You make it your aim to honor the Lord you trust. You wrestle daily with the counter-cultural oddity of doing that.

And most of you, I imagine, are as mired as I am in old-age habits, including the political ones. *Simul iustus et peccator*, as we Lutherans say. Sinner and saint all jumbled together in the same wretched package (Rom. 7:24).



Matthew matches his opening snapshot of prostrated Magi with a closing snapshot of prostrated disciples, here pledging fealty to the resurrected Christ. These fellows are as underwhelming as the Magi were impressive. "But some doubted," it says (Matt. 28:17).

There's a heap of doubt at work in today's set of disciples. One sees mixed loyalties wherever one looks. Over here knees bend to a presidential regime as indisposed to our Lord's new-regime agenda as any we've ever encountered. There's not a chance that the Sermon on the Mount is in the current stack of Oval Office reading material. Over there an honest eye will spot a heap of genuflection, however much denied, to the pooh-bahs of the secular left. It surfaces, if nowhere else, in an impulse to keep one's Christian identity under wraps lest this somehow give offense to a culture that holds all "religious" expression in equal contempt. That Christ confessed should be of unique benefit to crushed and battered people is proscribed as a

bizarre, unseemly thought—and Christians swallow this, or at least they play along. For shame!

Shame too on our persistent habit of indulging in the ways of name-calling and “cancel-culture.” We do it among ourselves. It’s been a feature of Lutheran church-life since Luther butted heads with Carlstadt. How quick we are execute our writs of excommunication, if not by formal resolution, then by the daily practice of choosing who to talk to, and who to avoid like the plague. Our country’s political mess serves merely to exacerbate these habits. What are the chances that a set of ELCA pastors in my town will sit down with a set LCMS pastors for a frank and honest conversation about the affairs of the day, one that starts and ends with their shared confession that Jesus is Lord? Answer: zilch. Do Democrats and Republicans consort? Why, pray tell, should we?

Thus those granite-like habits I spoke of at the beginning—another example of my own need to repent. Your need too, I should think. Thank God that Christ is the ultimate practitioner of Epiphany politics. He insists today on loving his enemies. He refuses to fire his addled, dopey disciples. “Go,” he says. “Make more disciples. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” School them, that is, in *my* politics (Mt. 28:19).

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Tomorrow I will stare a dopey disciple in the face as I look in the morning mirror. God grant me the faith and sense to do this before I check the news feed. God grant as well the wits to ask the following question: “Is this a joyful minion of Christ I’m looking at, or another raging robot of the party I prefer?” God grant still further that a quick sign of the cross will supply the definitive answer.

Might a habit such as this help to etch our days with traces of Epiphany? Again, God grant—as indeed he has persistently granted over the centuries and continues to do. Not every knee out there is bent to a political Baal of one sort or another. Tucked away like yeast in the woman’s dough (Matt. 13:33), our Lord’s new-regime agents are somewhere bubbling their stuff. More on this next time, perhaps. Meanwhile watch for them. Learn from them. More to the point, thank God for them.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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