
GRACEWORKS

5648 Hammock Isles Drive
Naples, FL 34119

Phone: 214/674-4442

January 6, 2008
EPIPHANY OF THE LORD—CYCLE A

THE PARADE OF GIFTS

The Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

*. . . on the twelfth day of Christmas, my true gave to me:
twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-
leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking, seven swans
a-swimming, six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four calling
birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a
pear tree.*

Whew! Extravagant parade of gifts, huh? Sure is. According to advisors for PNC Wealth Management, the cost for that climactic twelfth day of gifts alone would be \$18,920.59 this year, up 3.1% over the cost of the same gift list a year ago. Just imagine that charge on your January VISA bill!

For some of us, by the time we get to January, Christmas gift-giving feels more like a credit card hang-over after a month of December excess. Indeed, by now the bills from December's frolic are coming due, and you may feel like you are being haunted by the economic version of the Ghost of Christmas past. All this to say, the very last thing we want to hear today is more talk about GIFTS!

And yet today is Epiphany on the calendar of the Church. This is a day when the people of God read and reflect on Holy Scripture which calls us to celebrate the gift of God's love for all humanity. Today we recognize the mystery that God loves us,

even when we did not love Him, that God chose us before any of us chose Him. For a people stumbling around in the dark who could never have found God on their own, He revealed Himself to us, like a bright burst of new starlight piercing the darkness.

What is it like to describe this sense of being chosen by God, of being loved when we were unlovable, of being adopted as children when we were spiritual orphans? What words can we use to express this great concept? The Scripture uses the metaphor of gifts to help us wrap our minds around this gracious mystery of God's great Epiphany, that is, God's revelation of Himself, of His heart, of His plan to and for all humanity. Did you hear how often the Scriptures today echoed this metaphor of gift? Isaiah imagines all the nations of the world streaming to Israel bearing precious gifts in response to the wonder of God's grace and mercy. Paul speaks of the "gift" he holds in trust from God to announce God's plan to make everyone on earth, Jew and Gentile, co-heirs of Gospel. And Matthew's Gospel tells us the famous story about the Magi, these gentile astrologers, who journey to Bethlehem bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All of this gift-giving in these texts—it sounds like another verse of "*The Twelve Days of Christmas.*"

And indeed, that would not be an altogether invalid song for us to sing on this day of Epiphany, for today, January 6, is exactly twelve days after Christmas, the culminating and climactic day at the conclusion of the twelve days of Christmastide, hence the name of the song. On this day, the Day of Epiphany, early Christians began the practice of exchanging gifts, to join in the metaphor of the scriptures, and to reenact the joy and wonder of the mystery of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. So it was not Christmas Day that early Christians marked by gift-giving, but Epiphany. And even today, Epiphany is still celebrated as the primary day to exchange gifts in the Orthodox Christian Tradition, and in other areas of the globe outside the Western Hemisphere.

So relax, when we talk about gifts today and it will not further exhaust your credit card. Today we simply marvel before the wonder and mystery of God's unmerited grace, poured out on all humankind, and incarnate in the life of Jesus Christ our Lord.

But when we say that God's plan to redeem all people, to make every nation a chosen people, was a "gift," just what are we saying? **When we say God's mercy is a gift we are acknowledging that it is not ours, and that it is not earned.** This is the unique thing about gifts that distinguishes them from possessions or entitlements. Gifts come freely; they are not compensation for our good accomplishments or diligent labor. Gifts cannot be earned, so there is no ground for boasting or hoarding when one receives a gift. They are miracles, surprises, amazing specks of generosity granted from the giver to the recipient. Nothing spoils the intended joy for both giver and recipient like false expectation and an ungrateful spirit. And yet this is the thief that lurks in the shadows around all generous acts, threatening to steal the sense of wonder from gift-giving.

How does it feel if the gift you work hard to prepare, and present with great love and energy, is received with a shrug of apathy or the disappointment of frustrated expectation? It feels terrible, doesn't it? I wonder how often God feels this pain with humanity. As the late Episcopal priest John Claypool once said, "When one receives a gift, we receive it gratefully, hold it lightly, and when it is taken away, use that occasion to give thanks that the gift was ever given at all." So when we reflect on God's gracious outstretched hand to us in Jesus Christ, and when we realize what an amazing and unearned gift is that divine love, we should never respond with a sense of entitlement, or forget that God's election and God's favor comes to each of us on its way through us to the next person. It is easy to forget this fundamental truth about gifts, however. The longer one holds a gift, or the more frequently that

gift comes, the more the recipient may develop a false sense of entitlement, of ownership, forgetting that the gift was unearned in the first place. How do we think about the gifts of God to us? The gift of life itself, or that we would be born in such a country at such a time and to be raised in such fine families, or to have the unique blend of personal and physical and intellectual traits we have, or to receive the eternal joy and hope we share in faith through Jesus Christ—how could we forget or grow calloused in our gratitude for such overwhelming generosity from God? Gifts, every one. God loves us, each and every last and lost one of us. That is the gift we celebrate this Epiphany Sunday. So what can we say? **Thanks be to God!**