

Sometimes poetry and music and art can express truth far better than prose. Case in point is a magnificent Epiphany hymn.

{10:30—We just sang it. But it deserves a closer look}

{8:00—One of the drawbacks of our 8:00 service is that we miss using and experiencing some of the great Christian poems that are in our hymnal.}

So, this morning I'd invite you to look with me at Hymn 135 in *The Hymnal 1982*.

This hymn covers all the major themes of Epiphany and has explicit references to 3 of our January Gospel lessons as well as today's Gospel lesson. And it points ahead to Lent and Easter. It's a brilliant piece of poetry.

If you look at the bottom, you might notice it has two authors. vv1-3 were written by Christopher Wordsworth, and v4 was written by F. Bland Tucker. Both of these guys were ordained. And both of them have a reputation as great hymn writers.

Christopher Wordsworth lived in the 19th Century. He was a priest, the son of a priest, and the brother of a bishop, and later a bishop, himself. His uncle was the famous Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. Besides this hymn, Christopher Wordsworth has 7 other hymns that are in this hymnal.

F. Bland Tucker lived in the 20th Century. He was a priest, the son of a bishop, and the brother of a Presiding Bishop. He is the only person who helped compile both the 1940 hymnal AND the 1982 hymnal for the Episcopal Church. Besides this hymn, F. Bland Tucker has 20 other hymns that are in this hymnal, including one we'll sing at communion {8:00—at the 10:30 service}.

So, we have 4 verses by two great hymn writers that speak powerfully about all sorts of different aspects of the season of Epiphany. And these 4 verses end with the same words: "God in man made manifest."

This is a huge Epiphany theme. God being made manifest in Jesus Christ. The Christmas season emphasized the Incarnation, God becoming a human being, God being in a man.

But Epiphany takes the next step. God is in a man, in Jesus. But in Epiphany we look at the ways that he is made manifest, the ways that he is made known. Epiphany after all means shining forth—God's presence shines forth in the person of Jesus Christ. And that's especially true in our Gospel lesson today—more on that in a few minutes. But let's start at the beginning of the hymn.

The first verse begins with images of Jesus' birth, and with the coming of the Wisemen.

v1 Songs of thankfulness and praise,
 Jesus, Lord, to thee we raise,
 manifested by the star
 to the sages from afar;
 branch of royal David's stem
 in thy birth at Bethlehem;

anthems be to thee addressed,
God in man made manifest.

Such wonderful images. We begin with words of praise to Jesus. He is first manifested by the star to the Wisemen. He is a descendent of David, he has a kingly lineage, he is the Messiah. But he is not just the Messiah for the Jewish people. He is Lord of all. And even foreign astrologers, Magi, Wisemen are drawn to worship him. And we should do the same:

Anthems be to thee addressed,
God in man made manifest.

We then have references to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and his first miracle at Cana of Galilee. These were our Gospel lessons back on January 13th and January 20th.

v2 Manifest at Jordan's stream,
Prophet, Priest, and King supreme;
and at Cana, wedding-guest,
in thy Godhead manifest;
manifest in power divine,
changing water into wine;
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in man made manifest.

Jesus is made manifest in the waters of the Jordan. God's voice is heard, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." His baptism is also his anointing. He is the anointed one, in Hebrew, the Messiah, in Greek, the Christ. In ancient Israel prophets, priests, and kings were anointed. But Jesus is Prophet, and Priest, and King SUPREME!

And his identity is made known at his first miracle at a wedding in Cana. He is the wedding guest who acts as host. He provides the wine for the feast by changing water into wine. And he does it with power divine, the power of God. But not only does he have God's power. He is God. His Godhead, his divine nature, is made known, is made manifest in this miracle.

In the words of an ancient Epiphany prayer:
"Behold a triple mystery:
The wise men come with precious gifts;
Christ comes to the waters of Jordan;
and water is changed into wine."¹

In all these things, God in this man Jesus is made manifest.

The next verse focuses on different aspects of Jesus' ministry:

v3 Manifest in making whole
palsied limbs and fainting soul;
manifest in valiant fight,
quelling all the devil's might;

¹ Epiphany antiphon for the *Magnificat*

manifest in gracious will,
 ever bringing good from ill;
 anthems be to thee addressed,
 God in man made manifest.

First, Jesus' nature is manifested in his healing ministry making palsied, paralyzed limbs whole. But not only does Jesus minister to physical ailments, he also brings wholeness to fainting souls, souls which are without strength, souls which have lost hope. Our world is a world of entropy and disease and death. But Jesus offers healing and salvation and life.

Second, Jesus' nature is made manifest in the valiant fight, his opposition to the powers of darkness. Not only does he resist temptation as we hear next week. He also frees those who have been enslaved by the forces of evil. A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it.

Third, Jesus' nature is made manifest in his gracious will. Gracious will. It is Jesus' will to share God's grace, God's gifts, God's favor on his people. It is God's will to take bad situations and turn them around, to bring forth good from ill. It is God's will to transform all creation, to make God's kingdom present on Earth as it is in heaven.

These are all the words of Christopher Wordsworth. All of these verses center on themes of the season of Epiphany. Wordsworth wrote a couple of other verses that diverge from the Epiphany theme. They're good verses, but they turn to themes of the end of time, themes we deal with at the end and the beginning of every Church year, themes of Advent and of Christ's reign as king. And they're wonderful verses. But they leave us hanging if we're using this poem strictly a hymn for Epiphany.

So F. Bland Tucker rode to the rescue and wrote a new 4th verse. This verse ties in with our Gospel lesson today, and points ahead to what is to follow on our liturgical calendar. This week will transition from Epiphany to Lent. And then we will begin the trek to the Passion and to the Resurrection. Verse 4 encapsulates all of this. It is also a brilliant verse. And it's actually my favorite.

v4 Manifest on mountain height,
 shining in resplendent light,
 where disciples filled with awe
 thy transfigured glory saw.
 When from there thou leddest them
 steadfast to Jerusalem,
 cross and Easter Day attest
 God in man made manifest.

Epiphany is all about God's glory being manifested, about God's glory shining forth in Jesus. So today in our Gospel lesson, we remember the episode in Jesus' earthly ministry where his glory shines forth more literally than at any time until his resurrection. On the mount of Transfiguration, the disciples Peter, James, and John get a peek at the blazing divine glory that is truly present in Jesus.

Jesus shines in resplendent light. Resplendent is a word that comes from Latin and parallels the Greek word, Epiphany. Resplendent means "shining out." And the resplendent light that comes from Jesus shines out in an overwhelming way. The disciples are overcome with fear and awe as they witness the sight.

But this vision of Jesus' glory is not an end in itself. Jesus and his disciples don't stay on the mountain. Instead, Jesus begins to walk the way of the cross. He heads down the mountain and begins the long trek to Jerusalem, a journey that will end on the mount of Calvary and in a tomb.

But Jesus is steadfast as he goes to Jerusalem. This is his purpose. This is his mission. He will take up his cross. This is also a way in which his glory will be manifested. And Jesus will burst forth from the tomb. This also is a way his glory will be manifested.

In life there are times of light and times of darkness. And this goes for the spiritual life as well. There are times when God's may seem especially present. And there are times when God may seem distant. There are spiritual peaks and valleys. The spiritual peaks are often nicknamed "mountain top experiences." There may be times when you might feel God's love or God's light shining in your life in a particularly palpable way. And there may be tough times when it's hard to even catch a glimpse or an inkling of God's presence.

In the valleys of the spiritual life, it's important to let the memory of mountaintop experiences sustain you. The disciples had a hard time doing this. The disciples experienced Jesus' glory on the mountain of Transfiguration. But they forgot about it in Jerusalem during his Passion. During Jesus' Crucifixion they forgot all about his Transfiguration. They lost sight of his true glory.

But then they experienced Jesus' Resurrection. And that mountaintop experience would be enough to sustain the disciples for the rest of their lives. Even when they were experiencing their own suffering, and death, and in some cases crucifixion, they held on to the Glory of the risen Christ, God's power of love and life made present in Jesus Christ.

We end Epiphany. We begin the long Lenten journey to Jerusalem and the Cross and the Tomb. As we segue into focusing on times of suffering and darkness and death, let us also keep in mind the Epiphany times of Resplendent Light, of the Glory and Love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Star and sages. Jordan's stream. Changing water into wine. Making whole. Valiant fight. Bringing good from ill. Shining in resplendent light. Steadfast to Jerusalem. Cross and Easter day. God in man made manifest.

We conclude the season of Epiphany. This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent and the long way of the cross. As we make this journey, let us offer our songs of thankfulness and praise. Let us address our anthems to the one who has come into our midst and who makes known God's glory and God's love.

God in man is made manifest. God's glorious presence shines forth through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the tough times, hold on to that presence.

In the dark times, remember the light.