

Epiphany 2, 2023

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In 1999 a scientist at the National University of Singapore was working to develop a fish that could detect pollution. The plan was to modify the fish's DNA so that it would light up upon contact of environmental toxins. It would be like a chameleon with this ability to change colour, except that the fish would not be able to do it at will.

The fish used in the experimentation process was the zebrafish – a native of rivers in India and Bangladesh. It is a tiny thing, three centimeters long, with gold and dark blue stripes. Into this little creature, the scientists inserted a gene from a jellyfish (the green fluorescent protein) that naturally produced a bright green fluorescence. Once inserted, the 'fluorescent gene' integrated into the zebrafish's DNA and caused it to shine brightly under both natural white light and ultraviolet light.

It is an interesting story with parallels to this morning's Gospel which tells of JESUS' initial miracle when He changed water into wine at a wedding. As His very first, the turning of water into wine was a type or an indicator of the great work which He had come to do: the renewing of our lost humanity. It was meant to be a sign that in union with Christ our life is to be changed – yours and mine. By the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us, we have new life to shine. We could say that there is to be an 'epiphany' in us – a shining forth of God's Light – kind of like the situation with the zebrafish. (Pause)

At the end of this morning's Gospel, St. John wrote, "This beginning of signs did JESUS in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory, and His disciples believed on Him." Last Sunday, we heard how God's glory was shown through the Wisdom JESUS demonstrated as a twelve-year-old in the temple. Today, we see JESUS demonstrate God's power to transform nature by turning water into wine. But the Lord also wants us to be channels of His Wisdom and power – of His glory – and so He has sent His Spirit to live in us. As the old children's hymn says,

"Jesus bids us shine, with a clear, pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine."

So there is the fluorescent zebrafish, and then there is us! And 'us' is where today's Epistle comes in. St. Paul, writing to the Church in Rome, lists a number of spiritual gifts: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, ruling, and mercy. Then he says, "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another." It may be helpful to go over this again. Here are St. Paul's words written in the English Standard Version: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

The point here is that we can be channels of God's glory – we can let His Light shine – if we use our spiritual gifts for the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ. As Paul says, "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another." The picture being painted is of a family – a spiritual family -- the Church. It is important to note that Paul emphasizes 'us' – the Body of Christ – instead of the individual.

Let's take a minute to reflect on what has just been presented to us: in the Gospel we have read how JESUS manifested His glory by changing water into wine. In that miracle, we are meant to think about the work of transformation the Lord wants to do in each one of us by His Spirit. But the Epistle reminds us that we cannot forget about the big picture – the whole Body of Christ, the family of God. Together, by the Holy Spirit, we are to be channels of God's glory, for the renewing of lost mankind. As small and challenged as she is, the Church is God's chosen instrument for letting His Light shine.

This may seem straight-forward at this moment, but as soon as we leave here, we will go back into a culture steeped in individualism. As Canadians, we are very familiar with our individual rights. We believe that someone or everyone should acknowledge and cater to our feelings and preferences: the tastes and styles and colours and prices that make us happy. Sadly, this individualistic thinking has made its way into the Church.

People now identify as being 'spiritual but not religious'. They are suspicious of what they call 'the organized Church', so they pursue spiritual activities on their own, apart from the Body of Christ. Of course, this means that they have cut themselves off from the Lord Himself since they no longer read and meditate on His Word; or feed upon Him in the Holy Communion of His precious Body and Blood; or share with others in Christian fellowship. This is tragic because it goes without saying that, with Christ and His Body, we are weak and susceptible to every kind of temptation. And that is exactly what the devil wants.

Expressing his concerns about this current form of spirituality, Kenneth Leetch says, "To be a Christian at all is to be incorporated into this body which is Christ. At its very heart the Christian life and identity is a process of incorporation into a new social organism, a new community." (from The Eye of the Storm) We know this and we believe it or we would not be here! After all, we have come together to listen together to the Word of God and pray in unison from the Book of Common Prayer. In a little while we will receive the Holy Communion at the same Table, as members of a family do. We all have received the same Holy Spirit and the same Cross was traced on our foreheads when we were Baptized.

We do this, thankfully, as a deeply ingrained practice of our faith. And perhaps we do not think about the knock-on effects our corporate life has on society. Our life together actually and truly impacts how our culture thinks and acts. And so then, as fewer people seek communion with Christ and His Church, it goes without saying that fewer are letting His light shine. Kenneth Leetch goes on to say that, "Linked with the individualistic ethos is the notion of a spiritual realm that is unconnected with the spheres of politics and economics, a pure world of the spirit that exists in its own right."

Unconnected? How can our faith be unconnected to the rest of our life? And yet that is what is happening. To highlight how ridiculous this tendency is, Leetch offers this thought:

“If you had told any typical Christian thinker in any century from the twelfth to the sixteenth that religion had nothing to do with economics and that bishops must not intrude in these matters...he would either have trembled for your faith or feared for your reason. He would have regarded you, in short, as either a heretic or a lunatic.”

JESUS turned water into wine and manifested God’s majesty and power. He did that, His first miracle, as a sign that He had come to save and renew our lost humanity. And as part of His work in the New Covenant, Old Testament patterns would be changed: for example, the Passover would be turned into the Holy Communion; circumcision into Baptism; the brazen serpent into the Cross; the cleansing of the leper into the remission of sins; Moses and the Prophets into Christ and His Apostles; the glory of the Lord over the Mercy-seat (of the Ark of the Covenant) into the inward Presence of God the Holy Ghost; and the people of Israel into the Church, the Body of Christ.

And so here we are, together as members of that blessed Body, united under the Name and banner of Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world: mere mortals, we are elect and redeemed to be instruments of God’s saving grace. As St. Peter wrote, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Therefore, let us “let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 5.16)

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...