

JANUARY 4, 2009
EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD SUNDAY
“AN ECONOMY OF GRACE”

Let us pray: Thank you gracious God, for the great, good news not that we have discovered the star of Bethlehem and have come to worship you, but that your light, shining in the darkness of our world, has discovered us in the far countries of our lives and has led us to this place of worship and service. It's in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Beyond the exotic details and political intrigue of St. Matthew's tale of three magi from the East—perhaps Persia or modern day Iran—journeying all the way to southern Judea by the appearance of a curious star in the heavens that they somehow surmised signaled the birth of a new king of the Jews—not to mention the luxurious gifts they bore and the camels they must have ridden (which you may have noticed find no

place in the story itself but only in the “back story” we heard from the prophet Isaiah), their initial visit to King Herod naively assuming that he would point them in the right direction to the new baby born to be king—beyond all these curious details that so fascinate us lies the real meaning of Epiphany—the “manifestation” or “revelation”, the “unveiling” or “shining forth” or “demystification” of God represented in the birth of this little Jewish baby.

It hadn't really occurred to me until the other day, but isn't it interesting and itself a bit of a curiosity that it should be St. Matthew the Evangelist usually claimed to be the most “Jewish” of the four Gospel writers, writing, it seems, with the deepest knowledge and respect for God's gift of the Law and for the heart of Jewish culture and religion, probably himself writing for a congregation of Jewish Christians located in Palestine itself, isn't it curious that Matthew

alone tells us this story of the visit of these exotic Gentiles from the East, come to bear honor and gifts to the new born Christ child.

But, of course, on second thought, it's not all that strange at all. For Matthew, particularly partial to the writing of the Jewish prophet Isaiah who looked forward to the birth of a long-expected Messiah and had once identified the pagan King Cyrus of Persia as just that one-time Messiah—the deliverer of God's people anointed by God himself—it was Isaiah himself who had again prophesied as in today's OT reading how nations would come to God's light shed upon God's people Israel. Or in another place Isaiah had prophesied, in a text we heard last Epiphany-tide, "*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a **light to the nations**, that my salvation may reach to the **end of the earth.***" Which in turn always reminds me also of God's initial

covenant promise to Abraham, the father of his people. Remember in Genesis 12 how God promised: *“I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing”* ...and in you *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” All of which the prophet Isaiah reiterated in his beautifully inclusive prophecy we hear so often from Isaiah 56 that stands as both challenge and promise to the church of our and every day:

“my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Which leads me to today’s second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians which speaks rather elusively and almost mystically of this mysterious plan and intention of God that is somehow revealed—or unveiled—made “manifest” or “epiphanied” if there were such a word—in the birth, life and death of this baby Jesus grown to manhood. And interestingly, though you wouldn’t know it by our NRSV

translation—or most biblical translations for that matter—the word that lies at the heart of this matter is one you’ve heard me mention before, a word that even in ancient Greek carries resonances you will immediately recognize: the word “*oikonomia*” or in English “economy.”

Here on this first Sunday of the fresh, new year of our Lord, 2009, perhaps nothing is preoccupying people around the world as well as our leaders as what we simply, if mysteriously, refer to as “the economy” which we now know in some significant sense is today a “global economy. What today unites us despite such distinctions as race, class, nationality, and gender is the fact that we share a sense of suffering from a crisis in our global economy. “economy” being defined in my dictionary as “the **management** of the income, expenditures, etc., of a household, private business, community, or government.”

Which, you might well judge is at the heart of our current global economic crisis, the lack or failure of any overall “management” or “stewardship” — another translation for oikonomia — of our world economy but instead a kind of trust — even “faith” we might call it — in the market itself. This is an idea some trace back more than a couple of hundred years ago to the “father of free market theory” who not all that surprisingly was a one-time Scots Presbyterian turned deist by the name of Adam Smith, who to simplify his theory radically, believed in what he called “the invisible hand” within the marketplace, which itself functioned as a kind of self-regulating divinity — a kind of god of the economy.

But as a leading theologian named Douglas Meeks has argued in a book entitled God the Economist I’ve been reading, from a biblical point of view it’s clear not that there’s some kind of invisible,

secular god of the market—which many have had good reason to lose faith in recently—but rather that the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Jesus is “God the Economist,” God the Master-Steward, even the Master-Manager of the Universe including but of course not limited to the economy.

You’ve heard me say this before but truth of course bears repeating, how the Greek word that is the root of the word “economy” is the word “*oikos*,” a word that means simply “house” or better “household.” *Oikos* also happens to lie at the root of related words in English like “ecology” and “ecumenical,” words that mean something like “the household of life” in a biological sense—ecology—and the “household of faith”—the *oikoumene* actually literally meaning “the whole inhabited world” before it took on inter-faith connotations. All this from the little five

letter word *oikos* which when we add the second five letter Greek word “nomos” meaning literally “law” or “regulation” gives us “oikonomia” or the “management of the household” — what we used to call in a much-expanded way “home economics.” My sister-in-law Carol is a retired “home economics” teacher—one who taught high school students the art of caring for one’s household or home.

And so Douglas Meeks argues, with some good foundation in the Bible itself, that God the Economist—God the Master Steward or Caretaker of the Universe is a useful way of thinking about God, God the Master Manager of all that creation.

And this, in fact, is the sense in which the word “*oikonomos*” appears twice in today’s reading from Ephesians in connection with God, as our author using the name of Paul, reflects on the way in which God has revealed or made known—demystified—God’s good

intentions for all of creation in Jesus Christ whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. Singling out the Gentiles—that’s all of us who are non-Jews—he writes “*for surely you have already heard of the **commission** of God’s grace that was given me for you....*” —a job, a responsibility, a “commissioning” to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the word the NRSV translates as “commission” is in Greek our word *oikonomia* which deprives us of hearing the startling if more literal phrase “**economy of God’s grace**” — what in the older RSV translation at least was the “stewardship of God’s grace.” I know that this may sound like quibbling over a small thing, but words matter, and I think when we hear the phrase “the economy of grace” our ears prick up precisely because they are two words we almost never hear together in the same phrase—the world of the “economy” being a whole other matter than the world of “grace.” But, as another theologian has

argued recently, in a book entitled “An Economy of Grace,” we in the church need to struggle to put these two words back together again and discover what “grace” has to teach us about “economy” in its largest sense.

The second appearance of the word “*oikonomia*” in today’s reading from Ephesians is found in verse 9 in which our author writes: “*Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of God’s power. Although I am the very least of the saints (that certainly sounds like Paul doesn’t it?), this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the **plan** of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things....*” Here “*oikonomia*” is hidden behind the otherwise good-enough word “**plan**” — a word we certainly hear often enough these days of bail-outs and massive

government intervention in the economy. The question always is, “What is the plan behind all this?” meaning “Do they really know what they’re doing?” and “Does what they’re doing favor Wall St. over Main St., the big and influential guys over what we like think of as “the rest of us.”

Here again God is pictured as the Master Manager—the Chief Economist—who indeed does have a plan—not a thirty-day plan or a five-year plan, but a plan for the ages—indeed for eternity—what Ephesians calls “*the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the **church** (here our ears prick up!) the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*” “This,” our reading concludes, “*was in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.*”

I know this seems a far cry from camels and wise men with their gifts coming to worship the baby Jesus but in fact this is what their visit really symbolizes: the showing forth or epiphany—the disclosure and demystification—of God the Economist, God the Manager—God the “Stage Manager” we might say, whose plan for the ages, whose “economy of grace” is revealed in this little Jewish baby who came to birth in Bethlehem, in Bethlehem at Christmastide so long ago and far away.

No Alan Greenspan isn't God—thank God. And neither is Ben Bernanke or Paul Volker or even Lawrence Summers, the former boy-wonder Treasury Secretary, short-lived Harvard President and now economic advisor to the President-Elect, however much even his closest friends say he frequently confuses himself with God.

The good news is that God alone is God—God the Economist who has a plan and who has revealed that plan in the life,

death and resurrection of this little child whom the wise men came to visit. And the really great news is that God's economy is an economy of grace—good news that transcends even our direst financial crisis!

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.