

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord, although it's really tomorrow, January 6th. Like we do with other festivals, like All Saint's Day, we've transferred this festival to this Sunday. And, of course, our remembrance of this festival is marked in our Gospel by the visit of the wise men from the East, offering their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the infant Jesus.

That is, what was proclaimed to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus is beginning to come to pass already, shortly after His birth. Namely, that Jesus' birth was "*good news of great joy ... for ALL THE PEOPLE*" (Luke 2:10), including the Gentiles. We rejoice in this good news every Sunday morning as we sing faithful Simeon's song as a post-communion canticle. We join with in him in praise for the Lord's "*salvation*" that he held in his arms, Jesus, the One who came as "*a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [His] people Israel*" (Luke 2:30-32).

And so, today, we see these Gentile wise men, led by God, bow down to worship also their Savior, Christ the Lord. Thus, we prayed today, "O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles."

This is "*the mystery of Christ,*" St. Paul says, "*the mystery hidden for ages in God,*" but now "*revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit,*" that Jesus Christ came not just to save Jews by His sacrifice, but Gentiles also, that Jesus was not just born King of the Jews, but "*Lord of lords and King of kings*" (Rev. 17:14), that Jesus came not as king to reign on earth with power from His Jerusalem throne, but as King of all creation, reigning over an everlasting "*kingdom not of this world*" (John 18:36) at the Father's side.

This is the mystery: that both Jews and Gentiles are a part of this kingdom, as St. Paul says, as they are in Christ. Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia: "*in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise*" (Gal. 3:26-29).

That language is rich. You heard a lot of this in our Epistle today, but here it is again: "*in Christ Jesus,*" "*baptized into Christ,*" "*neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ,*" "*heirs,*" "*heirs according to promise.*" Christ is the good news for all people, Jew and Gentile.

For God does not posit two ways of salvation: one for the Jew and one for the Gentile. It's not salvation through Moses for the Jews and through Christ for the Gentiles, as St. Paul says a bit earlier in Galatians: "*We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the*

law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:15-16). Thus Peter preached Christ to the Jews in Jerusalem: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Again, Peter preached, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation [think Gentile here] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” “To [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34, 43).

This is the mystery, St. Paul says in our Epistle: *“that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”* I might add, this body Paul is talking about is Christ’s body, and we become members through baptism: *“just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).*

For this very reason Paul became the Apostle to the Gentiles: *“to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:25-27).*

Now you might be saying, “Okay, Pastor. I got it. Jews and Gentiles, together ... saved by grace through faith in Christ alone.” I would say, “You good Lutheran; you good Biblical scholar.” But let me tell you a bit of my motivation for this focus.

I was listening to the news a bit over the Christmas period, and the newscaster was interviewing a “Biblical scholar” talking about the Holy Land and the seemingly insoluble Israel/Palestinian problem. They talked a bit about how many Americans viewed the situation and, for those who are on the wrong side of the issue, how the problem could be in their adherence to “replacement theology.”

Huh? What is that? I wondered. I had never heard of it. I “googled” it, and not only read about what people meant by “replacement theology,” but also that supposedly Lutherans “believe in the Replacement Theology, something which is extremely blasphemous,” as one misinformed blogger wrote (christian-answers.tumblr.com/post/98727003777/lutheran-church-and-presbyterian-church). That was especially interesting, since I knew nothing about it.

I searched in vain for that terminology in Pieper’s “Christian Dogmatics.” I felt a little better. It wasn’t just that I had partaken of too much communion wine after Holy Communion one day at the seminary. But although the term was not used, Pieper did expressly deny what we are accused of teaching (Pieper, III, 532-4).

The accusation is that we teach that “the Christian Church has ‘replaced’ Israel as God’s chosen people” (wels.net/faq/replacement-theology). One reason that this is so important to the accusers is so that they can maintain their false theology that God saves Jews and Gentiles differently, according to different dispensations, so that they can teach that the establishment of the modern state of Israel is God preparing the way for Jesus to return to establish His millennial kingdom in Jerusalem. This is false theology.

But again, the accusation is false. We do not teach that Israel has been replaced by the Christian Church. Rather, we teach that Israel was the Old Testament church, and the New Testament church, the body of Christ, is just a continuation of the real Israel. Remember, last Sunday, I mentioned that in that text from Matthew which follows our Gospel text today, Jesus was seen as the embodiment of Israel, kept safe in Egypt in a time of danger, called out of Egypt to deliver His people from their sins. The Old Testament people needed saving; they were saved by believing in the promise — the seed of woman, the offspring of Abraham, the descendent of David; New Testament people, Jew and Gentile, also need saving; we are saved by looking to Jesus and calling on His name, as St. Paul says, “*there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’*” (Rom. 10:12-13).

Moreover, contrary to our accusers, the dispensationalists, there is no distinction, with regard to unbelievers. Not only Gentiles but also Jews are condemned for unbelief. “*Whoever does not believe is condemned,*” (Mark 16:16), as Jesus teaches. Physical descent from Jacob does not get anyone any advantage. St. Paul again teaches, “*not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring*” (Rom. 9:6-8).

Well, learning all this, I had an Epiphany this week. I hope it was enlightening to you also, for this is the light that has been shined upon us Gentiles also: the mystery of Christ, the true Light of the world. These are “*the unsearchable riches of Christ*” that Paul has preached to us today, that was demonstrated to us by the Gentile wise men who came to His light. Be gone with the false accusations. Baptized into Christ and believing in Him makes us one in Him and with each other; it makes us Gentiles fellow heirs with believing Jews; it makes us fellow partakers of Christ’s promises. Thus we pray again, “Lead us [today], who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with [the Father] and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.