

Epiphany 3

<i>Mattins</i>	Isaiah 55
<i>Introit</i>	Psalm 15
<i>Epistle</i>	Romans 12:16-21
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 8:1-13
<i>Evensong</i>	Isaiah 56

EPISTLE AND GOSPEL

The epistle continues the reading in course through Romans, with a clear progression. The Epiphany 2 epistle taught how love is to be worked out, especially within the body of Christ, while the Epiphany 3 epistle teaches about love to all. It offers universal altruism as a basic principle of Christian ethics: repay evil to “*no man*,” do what is honorable before “*all men*,” live peaceably with “*all men*” (Romans 12:17-18 KJV).

One can imagine an interlocutor responding – “Sure, all people, everybody, except for these persecutors of the church.” And back comes the answer of St. Paul: “if your enemies are hungry, feed them” (Romans 12:20 NRSVue). That same progression appears in the Litany: a petition for those in need, followed by a petition for “all men,” followed by one for “enemies, persecutors, and slanderers” (BCP 34).

The gospel is another manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God, and another response in faith to that manifestation. In the gospels for the Sundays after the Epiphany, this is the first time that a gentile offers the response of faith. Again, even though the epistle and gospel are proceeding along separate tracks, there are points of contact. We are to do good to all people (epistle), and to the degree this character is formed in us, it is only a reflection of the character of our Lord (gospel). One recipient of Jesus’s healing in the gospel is ceremonially impure, while the other is in a gentile house.

The theme of tearing down the barrier between Jew and gentile – a theme that began in Advent 2 (see epistle) and continued with the jux-

taposition of the Circumcision and Epiphany – is further developed in the gospel. Not only is the centurion a gentile, but Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a feast in which “many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” Raymond Chapman, a Church of England priest and commentator on the prayer book gospels, put it this way: “Mercy and grace come to the gentiles; what the Magi offered in their act of worship will spread into the whole world. The kingdom is opening to all who will believe, with no other demand of age, status or gender.”¹

The introit illustrates what it means to overcome evil with good, the ethic of the epistle.

PROPER LESSONS

The Sunday first lessons are from Isaiah. Isaiah 55 illustrates the response of faith, just like the gospel.

Both of the Isaiah readings continue the theme from the gospel that the blessings of salvation are extended to the gentiles. At Mattins: “Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee” (Isaiah 55:5 KJV). In the Evensong first lesson, God says “my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed” (Isaiah 56:1 KJV). All who “take hold of my covenant,” including the son of the stranger, the eunuch, and the outsider, will be brought in, so God’s house will “be called an house of prayer for all people” (Isaiah 56:4-8 KJV).

The first lesson at Evensong ends with mockery of the false shepherds who lead God’s people astray. Those shepherds are a striking contrast to St. Paul, whose conversion is commemorated on January 25, and Epiphany 3 always falls immediately before or after January 25. Note, too, the poignant connection between the faith of the centurion in the Epiphany 3 gospel and the conversion of St. Paul, whose witness led to the conversion of Roman soldiers (Philippians 1:12-13).

HYMNS

Mattins 1 O light of gentile nations
Epistle Lord of glory, who hast bought us
Gospel Hasten the time appointed
Evensong 1 In Christ there is no east or west

ENDNOTES

- 1 Raymond Chapman, *The Canterbury Companion to the Book of Common Prayer Gospels* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2013), 37.