

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY, Year B
January 8, 2012

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 2:2-3, 5-6

Matthew 2 2:1-6

I'm going to begin this homily in a way that could well appear to be blatant name-dropping, but I do think this little anecdote will be to the point. About fifteen years ago I was part a small group of people who had been organizing a dialogue between Buddhists and Christians that was going to be held at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The day before it was scheduled to begin, a few of us were driven by State Police escort about seventy miles to the Cincinnati airport to meet the plane that was bringing the Dalai Lama to the dialogue. At the airport we were put on a shuttle bus that was driven some distance out onto the tarmac to where the plane had landed. As His Holiness got onto the bus for the ride to the terminal he happened to sit down right next to me, shook my hand, and then kept holding my hand as we conversed with each other for a few minutes until we got off the bus and clambered into automobiles that sped along in an official motorcade to the abbey. Now to use a phrase from our own Judeo-Christian tradition, the Dalai Lama didn't know me from Adam and yet, contrary to what most of us in the West would consider normal or proper, here he was holding my hand for quite a long time. But this only shows how provincial we can be. Someone recently gave me a book about Mary of Nazareth that contained the following passage:

The body, as it is now understood [in the West], is something possessed by an apparently immaterial subject, the 'I'... The body is treated ... as though it is distinct from the person to whom it belongs; and the body in turn is the principle of separation between one person and another. It is managed in such a way as to maintain boundaries between individuals. For example, modern people are very guarded about whom they touch and who may stand close to them. [But the medical sociologist David] Le Breton argues [in his book on the body and modernity] that in most other cultures, bodily parts and flesh are perceived as being points of union or continuity with other people and with other aspects of the physical world. In many cultures, it is normal for people conducting a conversation to take hold of one another[']s hand] while they are talking.¹

It is not farfetched to see how all this relates to the feast we are celebrating today. The word "Epiphany" simply means "manifestation" or "appearing," and so refers to the basic Christian truth that the invisible God, the creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, took flesh and appeared among us—appeared not as though Christ's flesh was some garb that could be put on or taken off at will, but appeared in the sense that the people of his day could commune with him just as with any other human being.

We tend to take this for granted. For us moderns, the real challenge is to accept in faith that Jesus of Nazareth was also truly divine, but in the early centuries the problem was often the reverse. Back then there was a widespread heresy called docetism, which claimed that Jesus only appeared to be like us but was in fact so different that he not only

didn't have genuine feelings or passions but also didn't really have to eat or drink, and that he condescended to do so only so as not to seem too different from his disciples. This docetic tendency was a major factor in the iconoclastic movement in the Eastern Christian Church in the eighth and ninth centuries, when thousands of precious icons were destroyed. When the church finally overcame this heresy, its argument was precisely that because Jesus is truly what the Letter to the Colossians calls "the image of the unseen God" (Col 1:15), then material images of him and of his closest followers, the saints, are equally valid. In other words, all matter has been ennobled by the Incarnation and so is truly worthy of representing the holy and even the divine.

This is also why the greatest icon painters of the Eastern Church have looked upon their work as a sacred, prayerful activity, and why the church has canonized as saints some of the finest of these artists. This is especially true of St. Andrew Rublev, perhaps the greatest iconographer of them all. Of his beautiful icon known as the Savior of Zvenigorod, Henri Nouwen once wrote these moving words:

What finally makes seeing Rublev's icon such a profound spiritual experience are the eyes of the Savior. Their gaze is so mysterious and deep that any word that tries to describe them is inadequate ... They are not severe or judgmental, but they see all that is ... They are the eyes of God, who sees us in our most hidden places and loves us with a divine mercy ... Looking into the eyes of Jesus is the fulfillment of our deepest aspiration.²

Now all this is possible only because of Jesus' body, his flesh, which was once every bit as needy of food and drink as our own bodies. His is now a mysterious, glorified body, no longer bound by space and time but in a very real sense still a body, even if we cannot imagine exactly what this means. In a still different form—sacramentally—he comes to us in this and every celebration of the Eucharist. We may approach the altar saying with the centurion in the Gospel, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof," but the Lord's reply would surely be, "Of course you're not worthy, but that's not the point. You are in need, hungry for the bread of life. Come, eat of my body, drink of my blood, and let them transform you more and more into my likeness so that you can be an epiphany of me to everyone you meet. After all, was it not one of my dearest followers, St. Teresa of Avila, who said to you: 'Yours are the only hands with which Jesus can do his work. Yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine upon a troubled world.'"

It wouldn't be a bad New Year's resolution simply to ponder that truth for a short while each morning throughout the year now beginning. Whether you use your hands to help prepare a meal for the homeless, or to write a check to help those devastated by some natural disaster, or to hold the hand of a person too sick to do anything but receive that sign of your love and concern, or you simply allow your own hand to be held by a Tibetan Buddhist bodhisattva, in any or all such ways you can be an epiphany of the Lord Jesus Christ. May our celebration this morning inspire us so to live.

Abbot James Wiseman

¹ Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 24.

² Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 52-54.