

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jan 11th 2013

During Christmas we celebrated God's becoming human in Jesus, an event at once so familiar that perhaps we take it for granted, but at the same time so incredible that we can't really absorb its meaning. So the Church gives us, in the liturgy of the days and weeks following Christmas, lessons on who Jesus really was. That's what the Epiphany formally does. But it doesn't stop with the Magi. We have the baptism by John, the wedding feast at Cana, the walking on the water, and the many healing stories such as the one in today's gospel.

With our individualist mindset we tend to think of illness (and healing) as something that affects primarily the individual (though often the family as well). But the many stories of lepers and those suffering from convulsive disorders, for example, illustrate another feature of illness. The afflicted were literally marginalized. People couldn't have contact with them. Even to touch them made a person ritually impure. They were relegated to the outskirts of towns and villages, even to living in cemeteries. To some extent, we moderns do something similar. Think of how we have marginalized AIDS victims. In the not very distant past we sent people with tuberculosis to sanatoria. I do not question the motives behind such practices. Rather I ask us to think about the marginalizing that is a feature of illness – one we too easily overlook today. It is not just the person who is sick; it is the community that is, in a sense “broken” by the illness of one of its members. Ill people make us uncomfortable. We don't much like being with them, except perhaps for a perfunctory “visit the sick” (as in the corporal works of mercy). The healing of the afflicted individual restores the community to its wholeness. Jesus was healing both.

By His actions in this story, as well as by His words throughout the gospels, Jesus is saying that there is no marginalizing in God's view of how humanity ought to order its affairs. Luke makes a point of saying Jesus touched the leper, a man “full of leprosy”. That very touch brings the sufferer back into the community from which he had been excluded. Notice, in other healing stories, that Jesus looks the sufferer in the eye, speaks to him/her by name, and touches – almost always touches.

That's the God who is revealed to us in these Epiphany feasts.

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