

### Epiphany 2009

I was struck this year by the slight, but I thought significant, difference between the Collect for Epiphany in the old prayer book and the new. The collect, of course, is the special prayer for the Sunday or for the Season, which comes near the beginning of the Communion Service.

The prayer begins in much the same way in both books. *O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; and O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth.* The newer version leaves out the word *begotten* for reasons I can't go into here, but I will explain if you ask me<sup>1</sup>. The term *Gentiles* is more or less equivalent to *peoples of the earth*. It means *nations* and generally means *all the nations except Israel*, but occasionally Israel is described as a *nation*. Traditionally, a distinction has been made, describing Jesus as *a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*. The shepherds have been taken to represent Israel and the wise men the nations, but Jesus is certainly good news for everybody – Jew and Gentile alike. That is the point of the New Testament.

The two versions of the collect then carry on almost identically, *mercifully grant that we, which know thee now by faith.* The wise men were given the sign of the star, which led them to Jesus. We know Jesus now by faith. But, just as the star led the wise men on, so we are led on towards a more perfect revelation by the faith that we now have. And this is where the two translations really appear to differ. The new version of the collect has *that we who know you now by faith may at last behold your glory face to face* whereas the old version has *that we which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead.* The modern English translation may appear to be a more literal rendering of the Latin (*Ut qui iam te ex fide cognovimus, usque ad contemplandam speciem tuae celsitudinis perducamur*) than Thomas Cranmer's prayer book of 1549 and a lot of people wonder why? Cranmer usually translated ancient Latin collects pretty literally. My guess is that he is trying to convey that there is a much greater depth to this petition than the surface meaning might suggest. It is not merely that, when we get to Heaven, we shall see God. It is that the experience of seeing God as He is will totally change us. We shall be so overwhelmed by His love that our very nature will be transformed. We shall become pure love like God and live eternally in the rapture of unadulterated love for God and for humanity.

There is now an electronic indicator on Cuxton & Halling stations and it might tell you that the next train is for Strood, just as the star in East told the wise men that a new King of the Jews had been born. If you trust Network Rail (or whatever they are called now), you might have faith that you will soon be travelling to Strood. You might very much want to go to Strood, just as you may well have faith that you are going to Heaven and you may very much want to get there. But the analogy is inadequate. Getting to Strood will not be a life-

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<sup>1</sup> In the Authorised Version of the Bible of, e.g. John 3 v16. *only begotten* translates the Greek word *μονογενής*. *monogenēs* is equivalent to the Latin *Unigenitus* used in the original version of the collect, which certainly does mean *only begotten*, but many scholars think that in New Testament times *μονογενής* meant no more than *unique*. Hence the caution of the modern version of the collect. As it is a translation of a Latin collect we have here, not a passage of NT Greek, I think we should be bold and stick with *only begotten* as that is how the Church has traditionally understood the nature of Christ.

transforming experience. Going to Strood will not make you a new man or a new woman. See Strood and die? I don't think so.

You do not form a relationship with Strood. It is, however, relationships that transform lives. They say that owners grow like their pets. I don't know whether that is true, but, obviously to some extent, they mould us and we mould them. We train a dog (or try to). Walking the dog makes us slimmer. Having a dog teaches a child (or adult) the need for patience and consideration for another living thing.

Much more that relationships with animals, human relationships change us. After the vicar had tried to explain everything at the wedding practice, the bride still didn't understand. So the bride's mother explained. *It's very simple. Just remember: Aisle, altar, hymn.* Well that attitude may not be very healthy, but we are very much moulded by our relationships with other people. Loving relationships with parents, brothers and sisters, husbands or wives, our own children all help to form us and make us better people. But human beings are never perfect and some relationships make us worse. Other people try us and we fail the test! But relationships change us and, the closer the relationship, the more difference it makes to the way our character develops.

Just as our relationships with people are much more significant than our relationships with pets, so our relationship with God is infinitely more significant than even our relationships with other people. Jesus became human so that we might become divine. Two biblical passages.

1John 3 vv 1-3 : *Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.*

And 1 Corinthians 13 vv 10-13: *But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

Our relationship with God is a life-transforming relationship. The technical Greek word is θεοποιησις (theopoiesis). God is making us divine through our relationship with Him in Jesus Christ. To *behold His glory face to face*, in the words of the newer translation inevitably means that, as Cranmer's version puts it, we *may have the fruition of his glorious Godhead*.

Let us pray: *O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*