

Epiphany II

“Grant that Your people. Illumined by Your Word and sacraments...”

These words from this week’s Collect express the Episcopal Church’s understanding of the significant influences that illumine our understanding and acceptance of Jesus. The first, the Word of God, transmitted to us primarily and historically through Holy Scripture. The second significant influence is that of the sacraments. As an aside, the Roman Catholic Church believes that there are seven major sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Penance, Holy Eucharist and Holy Unction which is often referred to as the Last Rites. We Episcopalians believe that only Baptism and Holy communion are major sacraments, major because they were specifically, we believe, instituted by Jesus, while the other five are lesser or minor sacraments within our faith tradition. Two significant influences that illumine our understanding and acceptance of Jesus, the Word and Sacraments.

The Word of God is presented to us primarily through hearing Holy Scripture within the service, reading Holy Scripture and hearing the Scripture interpreted either in the sermon or some form of Bible Study. Holy Scripture is a gift received from God for our benefit and spiritual insight and growth. To me, it makes no difference whether you receive the Holy Scripture as the literal Word of God or a document attempting to interpret God’s call upon our lives. The important thing is to allow that book the opportunity to touch our lives. For me personally the Old Testament and the New Testament are interpretative works, They are the people of God within the Hebrew covenant and the Christian covenant interpreting how God moved amongst them and how this God impacted and affected their lives. And they want to share the good news of God in their lives with us. They want us to hear Joshua’s words “As for me and my family we will follow Yahweh and Him only will we serve.” They want us to hear Mary’s great song, “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” They want us to hear the two disciples’ words, “did not our hearts leap with joy” when they had had a post-resurrection experience of the risen Jesus. These, our early fore-parents, cry out to us over millenniums,

“Seek the Lord, worship the Lord, discover how this ancient Hebrew God and this carpenter’s son, this Jewish son of God, can influence and transform who we are.” Listen to the Word, discover how it may nourish the very sinews of our being.

The second significant influence that illumines our understanding and acceptance of Jesus are the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion. The sacrament of Holy Baptism is garlanded with magnificent symbols, but the core of that sacrament is the eternal statement that we are the beloved of God. The God manifested in the sacrament of Holy Baptism is a loving, caring parent who says to us, you are mine, you are my beloved. The significance of infant baptism is the acknowledgement that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do to earn God’s love. The God presented in Baptism is the divine Being who exhorts us to come to Him, to live full, healthy, creative lives, not out of fear of retribution or guilt, but out of thanksgiving. The God Holy Baptism calls us to seek is the God who already loves us, cherishes us, defines us and fulfills us. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is the firm statement that the God whom we are called to seek is truly present to us right now. We can be excited about that; we do not have to be fearful. We can be in awe of God but we do not have to be anxious and nervous about that presence amongst us. The sacrament of Holy Communion is offered to remind us, in a unique way, that the God who loves us, is constantly present to us, nurturing us, strengthening us, sustaining us, enhancing our souls.

Holy Scripture and the Sacraments bid us, invite us, into a relationship with God. They are invitations to journey toward wholeness and holiness. They are invitations to accept a God who challenges us to life, who succors us when we hurt, lifts us up when we fall, delights in our joys, embraces us when we grieve and calls us and woes us by God’s enticing words, “You are My beloved.”

Amen