

"Everything Is Topsy Turvy on the Sixth of Januervy": Some Thoughts on Epiphany

**"Everything is topsy turvy on the sixth of Januervy,
all because it's topsy turvy day!"**

--a line from the song "Topsy Turvy" by Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz in
the Disney film *Hunchback of Notre Dame*

If you've ever seen a version of *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (or read the book by Victor Hugo) you've experienced a slice of an old Epiphany celebration called "The Feast of Fools". During this celebration, the people with the lowest power and social ranking were for one day raised up. Children could be bishops or a poor man could be king. Those usually in power were often mocked.

Epiphany is still an interesting day. It traditionally caps off nearly two weeks of merrymaking (the twelve days of Christmas) with an even bigger party. Even today throughout the world (though not so much in the US), Epiphany is celebrated with parades, gift-giving, and Mardi Gras-type parties. Some people celebrate Epiphany for eight days, similar to how Christmas may be celebrated for twelve days. But how could such rabble-rousing be appropriate for a holy day?

Epiphany (also called "Theophany" or "Three Kings Day") is a Christian holiday dating back to the fourth century, if not earlier. While Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, Epiphany is God's revelation of Christ to the world. The traditional text for Christmas is Luke 2:1-21 (Christ's birth narrative in Bethlehem with the shepherds). The traditional texts for Epiphany are Matthew 2:1-12 (The visit of the wise men) and Matthew 3:1-17 (Jesus' baptism). John 2:1-12 (The wedding at Cana) is sometimes thrown into the mix, too.

Perhaps the best Scripture for Epiphany is Luke 2:29-32, 34. A righteous man named Simeon meets Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus for the first time and Simeon proclaims,

**"Sovereign Lord... my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel...
This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many."**

You could think of Epiphany this way: Christmas is God's gift of the Messiah to the Jews (represented by Mary and the shepherds), while Epiphany is the expansion of God's gift of the Messiah to the world (represented by the wise men, who were Gentiles from another country).

You could also think of Epiphany this way: when a baby is born, usually only the baby's family tends to think of this person as someone particularly special. It's only sometime later that a person may be recognized by others as a world-changer. Jesus didn't stop as a cute helpless baby. That was just the starting point. Jesus was out to save the world, which was going to upset the world quite a bit. Jesus knew some people were going to love him, others would hate him, and wars were going to be fought over him. (Matthew 10:21-22) No good deed goes unpunished, after all. As part of his salvific acts, Jesus lifts high the lowly and humble, and throws down the high and self-righteous.

Sometimes Epiphany is applied to the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. The idea behind the holiday is the same: Christ will be revealed to the world for who he is, and nothing will ever be the same.

The world is topsy-turvy because of Christ, and on Epiphany we celebrate this craziness. People often don't appreciate the craziness Christ has brought to the world, but it's a craziness that needed to be brought. It's like a giant light switch has been flipped on, and all the cockroaches are running for cover. The darkness may have seemed calm and safe, but it only covered up evil. Now evil can be identified and exposed, but unlike a cockroach, evil fights back. So the world seems chaotic, but it's a necessary chaos. Fortunately it's only a matter of time before the light will win.

The ancient "Feast of Fools" usually lasted one day out of the year, but one day the social upset it represented will be an everyday reality because of Christ. Jesus' mother Mary proclaims this is the kind of God we serve:

**"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty." Luke 1:51-53**

I wish you all a happy, topsy-turvy Epiphany!