

Deeds of Power, Acts of Kindness
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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In the Name of God: Creator, Christ, Spirit. Amen.

As we were concluding our worship service last Sunday, we sang a hymn that includes this verse:

*"Manifest at Jordan's stream, Prophet, Priest, and King Supreme;
and at Cana, wedding guest, in thy God-head manifest;
manifest in power divine, changing water into wine;
anthems be to thee addressed, God in man made manifest."*

I remind you of that hymn because it recalls the central act in today's gospel – the miracle at Cana – and because it frames the spirit of the season we're now in. The season of Epiphany is the season of manifestation. At Christmas, the light comes into the world. In Epiphany, the light shines out to that same world, making the glory of God apparent and available to all.

So, honoring that sequence, we today get the story of the wedding feast, the very first miracle reported in John's gospel. Jesus discovers that the propitious moment has arrived and his power is unleashed for good. This is not done simply to keep the party going. This isn't a parlor trick. This isn't Yeshua the Magnificent, Wedding Entertainer! This is an invitation to believe and to trust more deeply. The light of Christ has come into the world, it is being openly shown, manifested, and the world is invited to approach that warm light in search of healing and salvation.

The sub-themes of abundance and goodness (up to 180 gallons of very fine wine) are added to underscore the quantity and quality of God's gift. I recently saw a bottle of fine California wine on a restaurant menu going for \$230; using that figure, the offering that Jesus made in Cana would fetch about \$175,000 in one of our finer dining establishments.

It's easy to be awed (and amused) by this story but there's another aspect to it that is equally important. This piece also manifests the light of God, albeit in humbler ways. Notice the role the mother of Jesus plays in the narrative. (Notice also, by the way, that she's never referred to by name.) She's the one who sees that the wine is giving out. She's also aware that social disaster will soon follow; the host will be covered in shame because of his inability to provide for his guests. He is perhaps careless or, more likely, too poor to do better. Either way, the happy occasion will implode and his reputation will be ruined.

In the face of imminent cultural catastrophe, the holy mother turns to her son and expects him to do the next right thing. He rebuffs her but she stays the course – there's too much at stake for either of them to turn away. Pressed into it, like a chick nudged from the nest, Jesus accesses his power, saves the day, and launches his public ministry; the simple act of caring invites the miracle.

So the love, the light, and the life of God are manifested in his power and in her kindness. It's important to see both sides of that, particularly as we take up our ministry of manifestation. That's the point of Epiphany, by the way – we join Jesus and his mother and his disciples in shining the divine light into the dark corners of our souls and onto our world. Most of us are not capable of great deeds of power, miracles; all of us are capable of acts of kindness. And that, I suspect, conforms to God's best plan for us. That has more power, over time, to bring in the Kingdom that Jesus initiated and then handed to us. We're reminded here of Mother Teresa's guiding dictum – “We can do no great things. We can do small things with great love.”

Mother Teresa did many of those small things in India. Another person of the Spirit who spent considerable time there is Andrew Harvey, the author and traveling teacher. One of his commitments is to manifest the light in some tangible way every day. Recalling one memorable experience he writes, “Outside a temple in South India, there was a long line of desolate-looking beggars and among them a very old woman, dressed in a ragged and filthy sari, with no shoes. I gave her what I had on me, about a dollar. I watched in amazement as she walked unsteadily over to the nearest food stand, bought a handful of chapatis, broke them carefully in two, and shared them with a dog as emaciated as she was.”

Harvey's act of kindness invited her act in response and he never forgot that silent witness to the spirit of brave charity. He's convinced that this penniless old beggar knows something important that we all must learn if we have any hope of saving the world. No great things, only small things with great love.

One last point about Epiphany. Few of us can do great deeds of power, all of us can offer small acts of kindness, and none of us are asked to do any of that apart from the gifts that God has already given us. Paul is clear about this in his letter to the church in Corinth. He writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy, healing, discernment, mercy, teaching, charity, forgiveness, service, prayer, proclamation; these are but a few of the gifts the Spirit has sprinkled upon the human family.

And you, dear Christian, possess at least one of them. That's the biblical promise – there may be more but there's at least one. Take a moment this week to audit your soul – what are your gifts? – and then be about the business of offering them. Stay on the lookout for the smallest opportunity and the most obvious. Support for the people of Haiti, of course, comes to mind this morning;

you may not be able to fly down and dig people out from under buildings but there is certainly something you can do to shine the light of God into that nightmare.

So, today and every day, manifest.

*Manifest in making whole, palsied limbs and fainting soul;
manifest in valiant fight, quelling all the devil's might;
manifest in gracious will, ever bringing good from ill;
anthems be to thee addressed, God in you made manifest.*

Amen.