This feast of Epiphany is all about inclusion!

Canon Bill Goodes

Epiphany – Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-2,10-24, Ephesians 3:1 – 12, Matthew 2:1 – 12

“Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace.” (Ephesians 3:7). The Feast of the Epiphany has for some years now been a rather ambiguous one for me – I went to Perth in January 1987 to become Rector of the parish of Mosman Park, and arrived on the train on Epiphany. We went to the Cathedral, and the Dean’s sermon began, “We in Perth have always been suspicious of wise men from the east!” I took this rather personally, and was only a little mollified when after the service he assured me that I was really from the Middle East!

I’m sure you have heard lots of sermons which have explored the notion of kingship – and how kings in our day are very different from kings in New Testament times, and so terms like “the Kingdom of God” or “Christ the King” require a fair bit of unpacking!. And in spite of the “we three kings” aspects of this feast of the Epiphany, I don’t intend to go into that contrast, but rather to explore the ambiguities of the idea of “servant” – that expression in the letter to the Ephesians really stood out for me when I looked at today’s readings.

So, what does it mean for Paul to say he is ‘a servant of the gospel‘ – and is it a term that we should try to apply to ourselves? There are two Greek words that are commonly translated as “servant” – one is δουλος which is also translated “slave”. This word speaks particularly of the subservient role of the servant, owned by the master. In some Roman households, and indeed in some of the Gospel parables,

slaves were given considerable responsibility, but always there is the "at the master's pleasure" undertone to their position. Remember the unworthy slave in the parable consigned "to outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth"!

The other word frequently translated as "servant" is the one used in today's passage from Ephesians 3 – the word διακονος which comes into English as "deacon". This word is also translated as "minister", and so it has two directions – one of "being under authority", and the other of ministering to others. So, the apostle in this passage is stating that he is both under the authority of the Gospel, and also responsible for ministering the Gospel to others.

This ministering involves both the transmission of the Good news, and its living out in practical terms. If this is true of the apostle, it is true also of the apostolic Church – we are both under the authority of the Gospel, and also responsible for its transmission and its day-to-day expression.

Incidentally, this two-fold nature of the servant, the minister, has its echoes in other places – when we describe a personas an ordained minister, we acknowledge that that person is both under the authority of the Church, and also responsible for transmitting the Church's message and living it out in daily life. In our tradition, this is symbolised by the granting of the Bishop's licence to minister in a particular pastoral situation. And when we style someone say, "Minister for health" or even "Prime Minister", we are saying that they act under authority – nominally of the Crown, but also of the Australian Constitution – so they are sworn in as "ministers" by the King's representative before they are permitted to undertake their task of transmitting the Australian way and living it out day by day. I loved the story of the man who ended his letter to a government minister, "You have the honour to remain, sir, my humble and obedient

servant…”

Now we are servants, ministers of the Gospel – but I’m afraid that we don’t always act as though we were under the authority of the Gospel – we often behave rather as though the gospel was under our authority – our authority to determine its content and decide how it is to be expressed in daily life. Certainly there is a need in each generation to express the Good News of Jesus in ways that are appropriate to the time and its way of thinking and speaking, but our diaconal nature as “servants of the gospel” does not allow us to choose which bits we like and which we can neglect! We are under authority!

The writer in this passage that we read this morning speaks of the gospel in terms of the revealing of a “mystery” – and there will always be more to the Gospel than our limited understanding can fathom. “Servants of the Gospel” should always be open to the revealing of deeper understanding of God’s gracious will for us.

For those to whom the letter to the Ephesians was written, one deeper thing that was being revealed to them by the apostle was about the inclusion of Gentiles in the loving purposes of God. When Matthew includes the story of the wise ones from the east visiting the infant Jesus in his account of the story of Jesus he has that same purpose. Gentiles were to be included in the faith community along with the faithful members of God’s Old Covenant people. This feast of Epiphany is all about inclusion! So, as ministers of this Gospel, we have to be all about inclusion: Jews and Gentiles share in the good purposes of God – share in the company of God’s chosen people.

In the material for last year’s Lambeth Conference of Bishops, it was highlighted that the typical Anglican today is an evangelical African aged in their 30s – I can’t remember whether it was a man or a woman! In spite of the fact that a significant number of African Bishops could not or chose not to attend the Lambeth Conference, it was clear that the

African Churches represent a growing majority of the Anglican Communion. Are white English-speaking Anglo Saxons now “the Gentiles”? Are we being invited to rejoice that we are included?

But putting aside that revolutionary thought, how are we to transmit this good news of God’s radical inclusion? Can we enter more deeply into this aspect of the mystery of the gospel? Have another look at your Mission Action Plan and identify some of the ways that you have committed yourselves to stand for this inclusion. This parish has a long history of ministering this aspect of the Gospel in word and action. Your notice board regularly placards God’s gracious will that all can participate in his work.

Your work with Saint John’s Youth Services and your charity shop try to express in action this good purpose for all people. Your welcome to people of varied backgrounds into your services speaks of this ministering of the Gospel.

As “servants of the Gospel” we are invited to bring to the Christ-child our treasures – what the wise ones brought in their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and to recognize what the apostle describes as the “wisdom of God in all its rich variety” that God’s church is to make known to the world, to the authorities, and even to the “heavenly places”.

Let us rejoice in the authority under which we serve, and minister this wonder both in our message to the world, and the way in which we live.