

Last week we heard Simeon's Song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, as he praised the Lord for allowing him to see the hope of Israel before he departed this earthly life. Simeon awaited the Lord's redemption, and God promised he would see the Lord's Christ before his death. When the infant Jesus was brought to the Temple for His purification, the Lord fulfilled His promise, and Simeon held God's salvation in his arms. And what were the words Simeon spoke? "My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Indeed, this child was the glory of His people, the hope of Israel. Israel was the chosen people of God's promise, the people of His possession. To them, He revealed His Word, They bore the Savior. But for what purpose did God choose Israel? For what purpose did He reveal His Word to them? They were chosen to reveal it to the world. At Israel's foundation, the Lord said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that through one of their descendants, not only their family and nation but *all* nations and families of the earth should be blessed. On his deathbed, Jacob called the expected Savior the ruler to whom *all* nations would cling. From Moses to Malachi, the holy prophets invite *all* nations to wait for, hope, take comfort, and rejoice in the Messiah as their own. As soon as the forerunner of the Savior was born, God opened the mouth of Zechariah to rejoice that the dayspring from on high had visited the Jewish people "to give light to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." The promised Redeemer was not for Israel alone.

Epiphany reminds us that though Jesus came to the lost sheep of Israel, indeed He is a light of revelation to all the nations. The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that this Savior would bring peace and God's goodwill among all men. Paul confirms as he writes, "I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation. ... This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." God makes clear that He does not desire the death of a single sinner. He doesn't want any to be lost but for all to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

This is the weight of Epiphany. The Christmas text relates the revelation of the newborn Savior to the people of Israel, but the Epiphany text reveals His coming to the nations. Thus, we would be remiss if we did not properly honor and celebrate Christ's Epiphany, as neither you nor I would be gathered here today or any day if it were not for the Epiphany. We are but the fruit borne by the tree that has enveloped the whole world. But Epiphany's significance for us goes far beyond our inclusion in the saving promise. To fully understand we must consider *how* Christ was first revealed to the world.

He was first revealed most wonderfully. A supernatural star appeared to magi in an eastern country far from Judea. God revealed to them in some manner that this star signified the birth of the King of Grace, long expected by the Jewish people. So the magi set out for Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews. Upon arrival, they asked, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." King Herod summoned all the chief priests and scribes, inquiring where the Messiah would be born. They diligently searched the Scriptures and showed from the prophet Micah that the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem. So the king directed the magi to this little town. Following his directions, they found whom they sought. They fell before Him, worshiping and opening their treasures. After, they returned home carrying the eternal treasure of saving truth in their hearts.

Amazingly, the magi were led by a supernatural star to Judea. Yet, still more amazing, God did not choose this star to lead them directly to Bethlehem. Instead, He detoured them so that Herod, with his chief priests and scribes, must first show them from God's Word that Bethlehem was the place where Christ could be found. The all-wise God had most wise, most important reasons for leading them in this manner. Without a doubt, one reason was this: God wished to show for all time to come that it is not by miracles nor stars nor angels nor extraordinary heavenly appearances, but through men, yes, through

His established Church, that He wishes to lead the nations to His dear Son. In short, Epiphany shows us that mission work is the obligation of His Church, of Christians.

Unfortunately, too many, even good Christians, treat mission work indifferently. They view it as a hobby, a trip to this or that city or village for a week to accomplish some task, maybe even some sightseeing, before heading home with less than they left with. Therefore, many believe they can take it or leave it, find interest in it or not. Further, they argue that their own needs, much less the needs within the Church, are greater than we can handle, so mission work is more of a luxury and burden. Therefore, in these distressing times, Christians should not be focused on missions but rather on *our* problems so that we do not hinder progress in other important areas of our lives and life together.

But such Christians are in error. The Christian Church is a debtor to the whole world still living without Christ. She must kindle the heavenly star of the Word and lead the unbelieving world to Bethlehem. We see this not only in our reading today but all Scripture testifies. When Christ ascended, He charged His disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." With these words, Christ made all humanity their field of operation. But the Apostles weren't the only ones to whom these words applied. They were the root of the tree planted by Christ, which should finally overshadow the whole world. The Apostles were the representatives of the whole Church. It is, therefore, the Church of all ages whom Christ commissioned.

It is the Church upon whom He laid this great obligation. It is the Church to whom Christ entrusted His Word. That's why Christ added, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The apostles have long since died, and though they filled the world with the sound of the Gospel, millions still sit in darkness and the shadow of death. The word exhorting loudly, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," still resounds in the ears of Christ's Church. It will continue to resound until the fullness of the Gentiles has entered Christ's kingdom, that is, until Judgment Day.

But who is the Church? It is not only pastors or even just church workers, but all Christians. Thus, the word of the Lord, "Go and make disciples of all nations," applies to you. Yes, you, who through a living faith have entered the communion of the Church. You have taken your share in the universal obligation of the Church. You have promised to do mission work to the best of your ability. Even if Christ did not give the command, by the light of the Gospel Christians would recognize it as their responsibility.

Now tell me, does not every Christian owe God a debt of love? But can we say we love God if we can calmly see Satan, the enemy of God, holding millions of people captive? Can we say we love God if we can calmly see that the greatest miracle of God's love is still in vain? That in vain He became a man for them, in vain suffered for them, in vain sweat blood for them, in vain died on the cross for them, in vain, redeemed, atoned, and won salvation for them? Can we say we love God if we can calmly see that millions do not know God, serve Satan instead of God, blaspheme instead of praise God, dishonor His name instead of sanctifying it?

No, as certainly as the love of God remains a Christian's debt even in all eternity, so certainly is a Christian obligated to share in the work of missions. Satan's kingdom must be destroyed and his bounty, which he robbed from God, taken away. On the other hand, God's kingdom, the kingdom of light, grace, righteousness, and blessedness, must increase, and thus, the whole world becomes ever more full of His praise and honor.

If you, on account of indifference, are no friend of missions and will not contribute toward advancing this work, your love for God has grown cold. Where there is no love, there is no faith. Where there is no faith, there is no grace. Where there is no grace, there is no salvation. A Christian is not only obliged to love God but also His neighbor. Does not Jesus command the lawyer who sought to inherit eternal life to love his neighbor as himself? When the lawyer tried to justify himself, he asked, "And who is my

neighbor?” Through the parable, Jesus tells us that anyone before us in need is our neighbor whom we are to love. And who is in greater need than those who dwell without Christ?

Can Christians, therefore, say they love their neighbor when they can calmly see millions die without God, without light, without grace, without comfort in suffering, without hope in death, in their sins, in their blindness, in God’s wrath and displeasure, in inexpressible misery of body and soul, and finally in despair go to hell thus to be eternally lost body and soul? Never! He who sees his neighbor fall into the water and does not rush to give him a hand does not love his neighbor. And does he show love if he sees millions swallowed up in the flood of eternal death and does not hurry even a little bit to help them? He who sees his brother’s earthly goods on fire and does not hurry to save what he can does not love his neighbor. And does he show love if he sees the eternal fire wrap itself around the souls of millions but does nothing to quench this fire?

And think of our times when world travel and communication are easier than ever. At no point in history has the Church had such privilege and opportunity to contribute to converting the multitude of unbelievers. In previous eras, Christians could do nothing but pray that God would have mercy and open closed doors to the lost. Today, we have access to almost every land and kingdom on earth, and the barrier of languages is nearly completely torn down. To be sure, the world doesn’t suspect these advancements have a greater purpose than the one it pursues, but these abilities are to make a highway for Christ’s kingdom. Since it is now easier to send the heralds of the Gospel to all corners of the world, the obligation of Christians to carry on mission work zealously grows each day. God wants the fullness of the Gentiles to enter His kingdom of grace. Christians should, therefore, use these advancements more faithfully and carefully in this wonderful time of grace to bring into Christ’s fold the many sheep who are still wandering in this world.

Of course, not all should and can go out as missionaries to places where darkness still covers the earth and deep darkness the people. However, wherever God has led you to that place where opportunities offer themselves, you must fulfill the duties of your spiritual priesthood toward unbelievers. This does not require you to leave your current call and devote yourself solely to missions. That requires someone with special gifts and special, unmistakable indications that it is the will of the Lord. However, we can and are to encourage such to do this work of love, while we, according to our ability, provide the necessary means. They can only do the work of their calling as we open our generous hand to do ours.

Besides this, there is no lack of need and work here among us, in our own town, among our own community, among our own family. Even if we do not have a great supply of earthly riches, many of us have slightly more than we need. Let us not forget that we did not receive these great blessings to let them rest in our bank accounts or profit ourselves, but that the Lord has given us such great gifts that we might invest them in His kingdom. What we have is not our own. It is God’s treasury. We are merely the stewards.

Above all, the Child Jesus still lies in poverty in His manger. He wants us to join the magi in opening our treasures and laying before Him our gold, frankincense, and myrrh as traveling expenses for His journey into distant unbelieving countries. The Christ Child comes to us in His poor members, in His poor Church, and in His poor lost sheep among the flock of unbelievers. Let us not wait until the hour of our death to pay our obligation of love! Let us in this life be more loving than Herod; who at the very least showed the magi the way to Bethlehem.

What excuse will we offer God if we have given nothing to carry out that holy and blessed work entrusted to us as Christians? Rather, beloved, let us take care that the bright star of God’s Word is kindled in our hearts for our neighbor. God does not become tired of doing good to us; we should not become tired of doing good to our neighbors. Let us, therefore, add many more ardent prayers to our small earthly gifts, and God will abundantly bless us. Praise be His glorious name by the tongues of all nations, forever and ever. Amen.