

## ***“The Mystery of Christ”***

The Apostle Paul speaks of a mystery in our text for today. Dr. Kleinig likes to remind us that there’s a difference between a “secret” and a “mystery.” Both involve something that is unknown. When you reveal a secret, it is no longer a secret – but when you reveal a mystery, it remains a mystery.

The season of Epiphany is a season of revelation – the unwrapping of the mysterious Christmas gift – that this human baby, born of Mary, is at the same time true God. Throughout the Season of Epiphany – in the Scripture readings, the hymns, and the prayers – this mystery of God in the flesh, is revealed to you and to the whole world.

The Apostle Paul has been called by God to be a steward of the mysteries of God – and here in our text, he clearly and precisely reveals the “mystery of Christ.” “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.”

Now, that might not seem like a great mystery to you – and yet, it is one that man has struggled with in every age. Who are the heirs? Who’s IN God’s kingdom, and who’s OUT? Does God love “that person”? Are they really forgiven? Will they go to heaven? And what about you?

From the very beginning – from man’s fall into sin – God has been revealing this mystery. His Genesis 3:15 promise is that the Seed of the woman shall crush the serpent’s head – the devil defeated, not just for some people, but for the whole world.

To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the promise is that through them would come One in whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. And when God “set apart” Israel as His chosen nation – the Israelites struggled with this mystery.

Think about it – their entire lives were ordered in such a way to daily remind them that they were God’s holy people. Their diet, their worship life, their potential spouses – reminded them day in and day out that God had made them clean, giving them access into His presence – that they were “set apart” from all other people.

But that did not mean they were somehow more worthy, or better than everyone else. God did not choose them because He saw some quality in them that He desired. He did not choose them to be the sole recipient of His love and salvation – but rather – He chose them to be the means by which He would bring forth the Savior of the world.

So even in the Old Testament – Gentiles (those not born from the bloodline of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) – were incorporated into Israel. They became God’s people, through the covenant of circumcision.

You see, John 3:16 has always been true – that “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that WHOSOEVER believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

That WHOSOEVER INCLUDED Magi from the east who believed that Jesus was their newborn King. They worshipped and adored Him, not just with their gifts – but with faith that Jesus was their Savior, the Savior of Gentiles! For, “it is by faith that God wants to be worshipped, namely, that we receive from Him what He promises and offers” (Ap. AC IV, 114.49).

The mystery of Jesus Christ as the Savior of all people was a huge issue in Paul’s day. The early Christians were bombarded by those who said that a person had to hold to the Mosaic Law in order to be a child of God – that one had to be circumcised and follow the dietary and worship restrictions in order to be saved.

Yes, God had given the Mosaic Law to Israel – but it was given to lead them to the Christ who is the Savior of all people. And yet, many refused the way leading to Christ and continued on the road of the Mosaic Law (which would now lead them away from the Christ).

The idea that God’s grace should be limited to certain people has always troubled the Church. The Apostle Paul knew this all too well. Of all the Jews, he had reason to boast about his worthiness – he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee – he had the proper pedigree, a fine education – a resume that couldn’t be beat.

But what does Paul say? He says it is “according to the gift of God’s grace” that he is a minister. His preaching is not some wisdom that he discovered – it was given to him, revealed to him – in order that he might preach it to all with ears to hear.

Paul says that he is “the very least of all the saints.” He’s not worthy of God’s love. As a matter of fact, he used to persecute Jesus and all who followed Him. But by the grace given to him – he was to “preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” – this great “mystery of Christ” – who is the Savior for all people.

Do you struggle with this mystery – that Jesus Christ is God for “those people”? You know “those people” – people who drive pickups into crowds – people whose teeth rot because of meth – those who are on the sex-offenders list – people who are lazy and mooch off the rest of society – those who shack up, or have abortions – those who dare to speak lies about you, harm you or your family.

The truth is that we easily identify those who are unworthy, and by default, claim ourselves to be worthy of God’s promises of grace. And that’s why God must continually preach His truth into our ears – the truth that no one is worthy, not even you.

Yet God is gracious – He loves those who do not deserve to be loved. When the darkness of thinking that others (or even ourselves) are beyond redemption – He sends forth the light of the gospel to shatter the darkness – that you may see and believe the unsearchable riches of Christ for all people.

God has sent me to preach His Word to you – so that confessing your unworthiness and trusting in Christ alone as your Savior – you too may receive His undeserved gifts – and live in the boldness and confidence that your sin is forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ, and His life and salvation are yours.

God’s grace is for you. All who take refuge in Christ “are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

You are fellow heirs with Paul who persecuted Jesus, with Peter who denied Him, and with all the apostles – with the Magi, Joseph and Mary, the Shepherds – with the holy innocents murdered by Herod – with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – with Moses – with Adam and Eve.

When you come to the Lord's Table – the mystery is once again revealed to you. This is the very Body and Blood of Christ – and He says that it is "for you." And with His "for you" forgiveness – another mystery is revealed – that you are reconciled to your Heavenly Father, and even now, sit at His Table with all the heirs of His grace.

O what an Epiphany! This mystery of Christ – revealed to you by God's own Word. You are a "fellow heir" – incorporated into the body of through Holy Baptism – a partaker of the promise of salvation.

Dearly beloved, there is no doubt about it – salvation is yours – in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.