

**“Epiphany”**  
**The Rev. James S. Ward, Rector**

**January 8, 2006**

I had the joy last week of attending our Marin Deanery Clergy Christmas party. A deanery is a geographical area within a diocese. This year we returned to the practice in Marin of several years ago of a gathering the week before the Feast of the Epiphany to wring the last drop of spirit out of the Christmas season. Sitting at the dinner table, I heard the story of one of our number who happened to stop by one afternoon at one of the congregations in the county that had split off from the Episcopal Church some years ago over one or another issue, probably the new prayer book or the ordination of women. He said he just stopped by to see what they were up to and was met by a lone woman who was cleaning up or setting up for a service. He said that when he left a half hour later he had heard a long litany of all the things this woman and that church were against.

I guess much of our identity can be defined by a list of what we are against. And yet we have become aware, what with the apparent erosion, or at least suspension, of our rights in time of war, of how vulnerable we are to becoming just a mirror image of the things we are against. Even such a figure as Saadam Hussein, in the bizarre antics of his trial seems to be asking the question: what difference is there really between my practice of torture and yours, America, between my weapons of mass destructions and your own? Understandably, we are scandalized by such comparisons even as we are by those of the new Spielberg’s film “Munich” which purportedly humanizes Palestinian terrorists.

But what remains undeniable is our tendency to become like those who are against us. Even God is easily defined as against whatever we are against—against evil and against sin, against “godlessness,” immorality. This is how religion is so easily co-opted, commandeered for our own purposes. Because we tend to see religion as the adjustment of human purposes to the purposes of a God who is against all that is amiss in his creation.

But in this season of Epiphany God is manifested as something entirely new. The prophet Isaiah says it very simply, “new things I now declare.” And these new things involve the God who loves the world—who is with us and for us and not against us. And to imitate that One who comes to stand with us means that we do not stand against the world or even against evil but with the world. This is truly new. It is a shift from our old human nature formed as it is in the rivalry of our over-against-ness.

We note this change in the “Servant” passage from Isaiah. The one who is promised to “bring forth justice to the nations” is not described as we might expect as a warrior Messiah who by Divine Might defeats the enemies of God. But this servant messiah establishes justice precisely by drawing near to sin and evil in vulnerable love even at the cost of his own divine life. Even in our sin God in Christ does not stand against us but empties himself taking on the form of a servant, suffering death and calling us to offer ourselves as his servant for others.

It is into this servant vocation that we are baptized and to this vocation we are called to form those who come to us from out of the world and out of the world's understanding of God and religion. The gospel accounts tell of an incident that contrasts the new with the old. The disciples come to Jesus and, accepting a vision of his ministry based on a military Messiah, they ask for places of honor and influence when he comes into his kingdom. His reply of course throws them and us off balance: "you don't know what you are asking. Can you drink from the cup that I must drink from and be baptized with the baptism that I am to be baptized?" Here in the image of a cup and of baptism is a reference to the sacramental life of the church already well formed by the time of its writing. Luke's version goes on to explain the point of this unique ceremonial practice of the church.

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (22:25b-27)

The Life of the God that we receive in the bread and wine of communion is the Life of the "Son of Man," in Mark's telling, who "came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many." The meal invites us into and forms in us a life of servanthood in imitation of Jesus. It is precisely this imitation that Jesus invites us into in the Last Supper narrative in John's gospel. In it he washes his disciples feet and tells them to do the same to one another.

The promises of the Baptismal Covenant provide occasions for our own formation as servants in imitation of Jesus, for our own self-emptying behavior, weaning us away from a God who is against the things we are against, or, alternatively, against us, and bringing us to the true God who cures our blindness to our own sin and liberates us from the prisons of our own self-love by calling us to loving our neighbor as our self.

I was amazed to hear a while ago about a congregation that formed recently in New England, its members having left the Episcopal Church because of the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. One of its members told me that it was in a merger negotiation with a nearby congregation that had left the Episcopal Church some twenty years before and whose membership was now rapidly dwindling and hoped by joining forces with this newly renegade group to gain strength. What amazed me was the report that this older group no longer was against the ordination of women. But, nevertheless, its identity continued to be rapped up in being against the Episcopal Church whatever its most recent reprehensible actions might be.

What does it mean to be a church, to be a congregation whose identity is not determined by what we are against? Today we baptize two small children who hopefully will be raised surrounded with images of servant ministry to counter and overcome the self-serving images of our culture and society. This coming Easter we also anticipate the

baptism of three adults who enter with us a covenant to follow Jesus in his self-emptying servanthood. How do we help our members to be formed in a way of receiving God and in loving God's world that is not preoccupied with some idea of what we are against, of what we are not? For if we belong to the God who is with us as a loving servant and who calls us to imitate him by loving our enemies, then truly "God shows no partiality" and "in every nation anyone ... is acceptable to him." And so it must be with us as well.