

Epiphany 2025 All Souls' **GENTILE: WHAT'S IN A NAME?** dtw

Each of us has them. We share them and they distinguish us, past, present and future, with the whole of humanity. They cross race, culture, age and gender. And I'm not talking about navels. I'm talking about boundaries - and drawing boundaries. No matter who we are or where we live or what school we went to or go to, or what our job is or what colour our hair, eyes and skin, we human beings have this in common: we have an extraordinary ability to create two groups of people, usually labelled *us and them*. We see the results of our ready ability to draw boundaries and make distinctions from the more trivial things like grand final footy or fashion taste to the much more serious things like boatloads of refugees heading our way or people belittling other people's faiths or cultures.

The Feast of the Epiphany in the Western Church celebrates the Eastern Gentile Kings worshipping the Christ child & presenting their kingly gifts of gold & frankincense & myrrh. We acknowledge each year on this Festival that God's plan of salvation includes Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles and in our Epistle today he calls this plan the great 'mystery': that Gentiles are fellow heirs with Jews of the Kingdom. This is God's great revelation in the coming of Christ.

We don't use the word 'Gentile' much in ordinary speech, so let's change it to something more familiar. The Greek word is *ethnikos*, whence we get the word *ethnic*. We know what *that* means; we see it in the news media. New Testament *Ethnikos* means pagan, heathen, unbeliever, Gentile – but let's use the word 'outsider', because that is precisely what other races were as far as the Jews were concerned – outsiders – you and I know what that term means, don't we? People in a small town can refer to strangers as outsiders. When I was commissioned as the rector of Mt Barker WA many years ago, I still remember the shire president telling those gathered that I could call myself a 'local' once I had lived there for 30 years! A horse that's in a race without much chance of winning is called an outsider – maybe you drew one at the last Melbourne Cup? People who can see that they're not really welcome among a group or a club will go away saying that they were treated like an outsider. People with different coloured skin or foreign sounding voices have been referred to as outsiders. No, 'Gentile' may not say much to us. But 'outsider' speaks volumes.

For many people, often in the in-club, what lies beneath is actually a real fear - fear of the other, the different, the strange, the alien. Them. Perhaps we *fear the different* instead of actually *making a difference* – *we fear change*, instead of *creating change*. Michael Leunig wrote:

There are only two feelings. Love and fear.
There are only two languages. Love and Fear.
There are only two activities. Love and Fear.
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results. Love and fear.
Love and fear.

And here is St Paul saying that it was in the cause of 'outsiders' that he became a prisoner for Jesus Christ. It was for preaching Christ to them that he found himself in gaol, and the mystery he wanted the church then, and now at the beginning of 2025, to know, is that outsiders are fellow heirs, members of Christ's body and partakers of the promise. The irony, of course, is that you and I here today are some of those outsiders ie. the non-Jews (with apologies to any present who may be Jewish). We are here *because* of that beautiful plan of God.

But, you see, the established Gentile churches over the centuries fell into the trap of so institutionalising the Church as to make it in many places almost exclusive instead of inclusive. It is so easy to develop a mind-set of keeping the Church to ourselves. Hence Paul's warning to the Gentiles in Romans 11 that they were reached out to by God initially because of the stumbling of Jewish believers and that they therefore need to be exercising a similar ministry to others – to other Gentiles as a faithful and thankful response. 'Privatised Religion' is the enemy of Church Growth.

So, just what *does* this word mean on this Epiphany Sunday for those of us who are 'inside' the Church of God today? Is an outsider someone who never attends church at all? - or someone who has no kind of religious awareness? – Who are the outsiders? You and I will know who they are in our situations if we think for a moment. Whoever they are, it was people like this and as varied as this, and there was no lack of all kinds of people in the cities of the Roman empire to whom Paul wrote, that Paul said are 'fellow heirs' with you and me of the kingdom. And we are called as the Church today, and in this New Year 2025, and always, to own it as a fire within our souls. Only there, deep within our Christian make-up, will it kindle God's plan of action within our church. We all have many resources with which to reach out and incorporate others into the life of our Christian community. You and I are called to embody the word 'Epiphany' in our lives: Manifestation! Epiphany means letting something be made very visible – letting our light shine. This is Hope 25! And Epiphany tells us that there really is no 'us and them' – there is only US.

This season stands to remind us with all possible force that, along with our care for each other, our concern must always be with those who are absent – outside, for whatever reasons there are. We are to strive and struggle for them, which may be a painful and costly process. We will often be unsuccessful. Paul was willing to be a prisoner, so much did he care about the Gospel for the Gentiles. It is only when we have a similar conviction that we can legitimately gaze into the manger scene of the Christ child now visited by those Gentile Kings bearing their gifts. There are millions in this great nation, thousands in Adelaide and the streets of this parish, who have the potential to come in adoration of Jesus, the King of Kings, bringing their gifts of grateful love. And you and I are called to be their guiding stars.

What a privilege. Amen.