

Epiphany VI Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins,

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For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand.

The second coming of Jesus Christ is not meant to fill us with anxiety, but finally with hope. But we must heed all of Jesus' warnings, and especially that which is given to us today. He tells us that false prophets, leaders and pretenders will be able to show great signs and wonders. Jesus assures us that his faithful will recognize him at his coming again, for his coming will be as evident and open as lightning. Jesus assures us that his faithful will be with him at his coming again, just as eagles gather round the dead body which is their food.

But there is this warning about false Christs and false prophets. Some will pretend to be Christ himself, and others will misrepresent Jesus. Remember Paul's warning about those who preach another Gospel: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we

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preached to you, let him be accursed. As I have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.”

We are all sorely tempted to remake Jesus into a figure more palatable to us. But there is one true Lord Jesus Christ, whose authorized biographies we regard as authoritative - the four Gospel accounts - and whose Apostles’ authority we recognize in the New Testament and in the Tradition of the Catholic (which means "universal") Church.

But Jesus warns us about false teachers or prophets. There is a difficult and challenging text in the letter of Jude which warns: “Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints. For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” That phrase about perverting the Gospel of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ into an excuse for immorality, and denying the unique and

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exclusive saving Lordship of Jesus, may well describe some of the false prophecies that tempt us in our day.

So how are we to tell a false prophet and a false Christ? Just because someone can put on a good show, fill a stadium and even work miracles is no guarantee of their teaching. Signs and wonders are no guarantee. Rather, we must look to the Scriptures and the universal Tradition of the Church, whose teaching saves us from being easy prey for falsifiers and pretenders.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. We all can make the mistake several times and always feel so ashamed for days afterwards. You are talking with someone and you see their child. You are moved by the obvious connection and affection and you just want to say something nice and pleasant. “Oh they look just like you, I can see you in their face, she’s got your hair alright, boy, you’re tall like your Dad.” Then you find out, from the parents, or someone else, that the child is adopted. I have done this countless times, suggested that adopted children are like their parents.

But our Epistle today would have us see that, while there

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may be no natural likeness, no genetically inherited traits, adopted children may grow up like their parents in deeper and more profound ways. Saint John tells us that as the adopted children of God, we are to grow up like our heavenly Father, so that people may recognize him in us, especially in purity and righteousness. It is our greatest privilege, the gift of God's love, that we should be called his children. The Son of God came to share the dignity, favour and calling of his sonship with us. He emptied himself of the privileges of sonship, that we might enjoy them. And we become these children of God by faith in Jesus Christ. As St. John teaches, as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.

God adopts us as his own children. This is the Gospel - that we who were rebellious servants have become forgiven children, through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ took on the form of a servant, that we might receive sonship. Jesus Christ took on our sins, that we might receive his righteousness. In him we have the confidence, the freedom, the security and the love of the children of God. We are God's

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children now, and our hope is that we might become that even more fully. It is our hope that in the face to face knowledge of Jesus Christ, we might be completely transformed by the Holy Spirit, into his likeness.

You are God's children, not because of your deserving or earning, and not because of who you are or what you've done. No, you are God's children in spite of who you are and what you've done, because of the Father's love showered on us through Jesus Christ. Here and now, and then and there, we are to live as God's children, to do our Father's will, whether on earth or in heaven.

God would renew us in the grace of our common salvation. Though in so many ways we have disowned him, he owns us still as his children, adopted in Jesus' body and washed in Jesus' blood. And we own him, not just as our Creator; not just as the source of all goodness, truth and love; not just as the Almighty; but in the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ, as our Father.

May God renew us in his love, that we might live in the joyful confidence and die in the secure hope, that we are God's children now.