

The 1st Sunday of Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ 23

Journeys are funny things. We can plan them as meticulously as we like, but rarely do they go as we plan. We may well begin from where we intend and most of the time end up where we wish to go, but the part in the middle can be filled with surprises. The car might break down. We might be forced into long detours due to roadworks or traffic jams. There might be strikes at the airport. And even when we do get there, the destination might be filled with unexpected surprises. I'm sure it was no different for the magi travelling to find the baby Jesus. For them it was a journey that was perilous, long and literally into the unknown. And those stubborn camels are only going to go at their own pace.

Today is the First Sunday of Epiphany. The feast of the Epiphany itself fell a few days ago on 6th January. Yet today, we also mark the Baptism of our Lord. We haven't even had one full Sunday before the tradition of the Church shifts our mindset on to the beginning Jesus' adult ministry. One minute we are in the stable with wise men visiting, kneeling in adoration and bringing the baby Jesus gifts, the next we are with the adult Jesus at the start of his ministry as he is baptised by John in the river Jordan. On the face of it, these two themes seem such strange bedfellows. And yet, maybe not.

Epiphany means manifestation. At Epiphany then, the child born in a manger is revealed to the nations. We get most of our Christmas narrative about Jesus' birth from Luke's Gospel and Luke's Gospel intentionally focuses upon the universal vision – Luke presents Jesus as saviour of the entire world.

But the visit of the magi appears in Matthew's Gospel, and Matthew's Gospel is very different. Matthew's focus tends to be more upon the fulfilment, through Jesus, of the promises made to the chosen people of Israel. But Matthew also tips a nod to the wider universal vision and he does so through the visit of the magi.

Now the actual number of magi is not stipulated in the Bible. Tradition has it from very early on that there were three, each representing the continents of the known world of that time, Africa, Asia and Europe. So, this is a vision that invites the entire world to come and kneel at the feet of the Christ-child. It's an open invite. And, whilst Matthew may concern himself with proving Jesus to be the fulfilment of God's promises to the Israelites throughout much of the rest of the Gospel, it will end in similar

fashion to how it began, with the command to ‘make disciples of all nations’.¹

So, the feast of the Epiphany is a universal invite to each of us to embrace a journey of discovery. It is a journey that will not only take us to places unknown, but also move us to searching deeper and deeper inside ourselves until we find the place where the Christ-child resides. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we kneel beside the wise down the generations and come to him in adoration. And as we do, so he grows within us until our hearts swell with love and generosity and all we can do is offer him gifts of devotion and praise in return.

And our journey doesn’t end there. This is why it has long been the tradition of the Church to bless chalk in the Epiphany service and for each member to take some home and use it to bless their homes. It is a mark to bless the year ahead, that it may be a holy and faithful one, and also as a reminder that here we commit again to the journey ahead of us.

The feast of the Epiphany, which celebrates the birth of the child, invites us to share the good news of that birth (and all that follows). To make it manifest amongst us and to make others aware of the universal invite. The visit of the magi should inspire a sense of journey and mission in us. And this is where a reminder of Christ’s baptism is so timely.

It stands to reason that Jesus’ baptism is not the same as ours. How can it, for he does not carry the shackles of sin that we carry. The baptism of Jesus by John is an example to us and signals the start of Jesus’ mission and ministry. Some think of it as a kind of consecration and confirmation for all that follows. All four Gospels make mention of this moment. John the Baptist initially refuses to baptise Jesus, claiming that Jesus has no need of baptism and that Jesus should be the one baptising him. But Jesus insists. Jesus is fully human and in solidarity he wishes to be baptised along with everyone else. But there is another dimension to this as well. Jesus says ‘it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness’.² Now, we could spend an awful long time exploring what Jesus might mean by this term ‘fulfil all righteousness’. But we might think about it this way: Jesus leads by example so that for us, our baptism marks a new way of life – it opens a new doorway to a one-off moment when we can each enter into something more. Through Baptism, we become enfolded in a spiritual identity that will never leave us. Whenever we rebel, or become

¹ Matthew 28:19

² Matthew 3:15

lazy and uninterested, the truth remains that we are still God's child. And every time we return to taking things seriously again, we remain God's child. It is a one-off event that can never be repeated. That moment when we become secure as one who has stepped into the life of Christ and the faith of Christ, knowing that Christ will never leave us. It literally marks our new birth into Christ. We will return to this in a moment. First, back to the narrative.

In the Gospel accounts, we have those references to the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven. We need reminding, from time to time, that what is being described here is not some kind of verbal photograph. This was not necessarily what was seen by those present, but captures perfectly what came to be recognised as having taken place. And while our baptism may indeed be very different from that of Jesus, because he has not been handicapped by sin as we are, yet our baptisms are like his in so far as our baptism is also a moment when the Spirit calls us to mission and ministry. Our baptisms into the life of Christ call us to share in the life of Jesus with others; to share in the faith of Jesus with others. It is the start of a journey. Baptism for us is a new birth into a new relationship and a new vision.

But such journeys are never assured. Relationships develop, in good ways and not so good ways. This is true of earthly relationships and heavenly ones. All relationships have to be nurtured with love and dedication if they are to fruit. So, in our service today, on this feast of the Baptism of Christ, we recommit to our baptismal vows and we are sprinkled as a reminder of the baptismal waters through which we are given our new identity in God. We look again to nurture the relationship and feed it with love and adoration, and we take the invite out to a troubled world so that it too may discover the life of Christ and the peace of Christ.

Amen.