

BAPTISM OF CHRIST

Epiphany is a time of precious gifts. Epiphany is a time to treasure. Last week we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus to the wise men from the east and for the rest of January our readings tell of this miraculous showing. Today the western church celebrates the baptism of Christ. The story of the Baptism of Jesus, at this Epiphanytide, this time of revelation and truth, takes us back to the meaning of our own baptisms.

The epiphany, the revelation of God, happens in two ways: a vision and a voice. As Jesus was coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being ripped apart. The same word is used to describe the ripping apart of the curtain in the temple when Jesus died. It refers to an act of God. In both cases what had long been sealed is suddenly flung open. And what he saw was the Spirit of God descending like a dove.

In Renaissance paintings of the baptism of Christ there is always a bird hovering directly above the head of Christ. But the words descended like a dove echo the image in Genesis of the Spirit brooding over the face of the waters. Rock doves look nothing like the ornamental creatures of medieval dove-cots or Victorian magic acts. Rock doves have rough dusty grey feathers and land in an ungainly way. Life in The Spirit of God is a bumpy and dusty journey - but one that is filled with visions and voices from God.

The gospel writers present this story as part of the preparation of Jesus for his ministry. But this baptism is not simply a rite of initiation, something that happens because it's the done thing. Nor even is it primarily about the empowerment of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. What matters is the encounter of Jesus with God, the experience of Jesus hearing the voice of God. You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

The River Jordan is the deepest depression on the earth's land surface. It is geographically unique. Only a few miles from its source the river is already nearly 200m below sea level. As it flows into the Dead Sea it has plunged to nearly 400m below sea level (over 1,250 ft). The name Jordan in Hebrew means the descender, the one that goes down. It meanders through thickets of tamarisk and thorn scrub known in the OT as 'the jungle'.

The experience of baptism for most people in the Church of England is about as far removed from the experience of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan as Stamford Hill is from the Himalays. We baptise infants with a trickle of tap water from a small bowl wiping them dry straight away in the desperate hope they don't start to yell. Baptism is a very different experience in other parts of the church and in other parts of the world. I love listening to stories of baptisms in rivers with birdsong and total immersion. As the water flows overhead the real fear of drowning is overcome as you emerge reborn. So often in life it is only when we come through the torrents that engulf us that we can clearly see God and live the life God created us to live.

The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his journey. The journey that took him to execution on the cross, to nothingness and to life eternal. And from the moment of our baptism, the beginning of our journey with God, Jesus walks with each one of us. Every day Jesus walks with us into a new day. This is a story of new life through companionship and faithfulness, through agony and through love. This is the new life in the Spirit we are given at our baptism. This is what it means to be made in the image of God

The baptism of Jesus establishes his identity. In Paul the baptism of believers establishes our identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also are we who God says we are. And in Jesus we too are sons and daughters of God. The identity declared at our baptism is only a secret word until it is revealed in the unfolding story of our life and death...and resurrection.

God knows us completely. God knows us as we really are. God knows what we are capable of, which is always far more than we can ever imagine. In God's sight each one of us is precious. But how often do we really believe it? God's image of us is marred by fear, guilt, our own sense of inadequacy. I believe it is a far greater sin to not truly believe that we are precious in God's sight than anything we imagine to be sinful.

At Epiphanytide the church invites us to see the divine in all God's awesome splendour: in the depths of the Jordan and in the highest heavens and to hear the voice of God echoing all around us. As we emerge from the depths of winter this New Year let us embrace the divine power that surges through us and rushes around us making all things new. Let us treasure this time.

Let us pray to the Lord of the flood: wash us with your Spirit that we may be your ark of life, your peace in the sea of violence. Frightened, we are tempted to make a permanent home on the ark. But you force us to seek dry ground. We can do so only because you have taught us to cling to our baptisms, where we are drowned and reborn by the water and fire of your Spirit. So reborn, make us unafraid. Amen.