

Epiphany: the extraordinary in the ordinary

Well here we are. 2024. We've had Christmas, had the new year. I wonder where your head's at at the moment?

Maybe you're like me and you've still got the Christmas tree up; there's still a few chocolate oranges rolling around to be eaten; still wearing your Christmas socks, which really I think should be worn throughout the year. You can't quite bring yourself to accept that we're now in January.

Or maybe you're the opposite and you're raring to go for the new year. Christmas tree is down, the house is tidy, you've started your new diet, your new gym class, this year you're gonna be really organised... well it's good to have hope.

It feels like we're in a transition period, where we're half looking back, half looking forward, gearing ourselves up for the year to come.

It's a moment of transition within the life of the church as well. Today is the first Sunday of Epiphany, and it marks the moment we move out of the Christmas season into a new one, called Epiphanytide.

And this transition can feel a bit jarring. In our scripture readings for the past couple of weeks we've been next to the manger, hearing about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. In today's gospel reading all of a sudden we're thrown years ahead. No longer next to the manger, instead we're next to the river, in the wilderness, watching as Jesus plunges down into the water and rises again in his baptism. It can feel discombobulating.

But we haven't quite left the manger yet. If you've been paying attention this morning, you'll have noticed that our hymns focus on the visit of the magi. The wise men, who according to the gospel of Matthew came from far-off lands, seeking Jesus to adore him. Our hymns pull us back to the manger; our gospel reading pulls us forward to the river.

And that tension between manger and river, between looking back at Jesus' birth and looking forward to Jesus' baptism, points us to what Epiphany is all about.

Christians have actually been celebrating Epiphany for longer than they have Christmas. In the early church in the east, it was Epiphany, not Christmas, that was the big thing in winter. And the focus of Epiphany in the east was on Jesus' baptism.

When the western churches came to celebrate Epiphany, their focus was partly on Jesus' baptism, but mainly on the adoration of the magi. Traditionally in the west, in our Christmas crib, we don't put the figures of the magi there on 25th December; we wait until Epiphany, when we remember their visit.

Why does the church connect these events in the life of Jesus? His birth; the adoration of the magi; his baptism in the river?

We connect them because each of them is an *epiphany* – which in the original Greek, means appearance, or revelation. In each of these events, who Jesus is, is revealed. It's revealed that in the person of Jesus, remarkably, God the creator has come.

That's why, in our modern language, when we say we've had an epiphany, we mean we've had a lightbulb moment: we've suddenly realised something, we see something new.

And that's what's happening in these events of Jesus' birth, adoration, baptism. In each of them, the people watching had lightbulb moments. They realised that the **ordinary things in front of them contained something extraordinary**. That here, with them, was the God of love.

They couldn't explain it logically. But somehow it was like a mask had been pulled off their eyes, and for the first time in their lives they could truly see the light. In each of these events, the light of God was breaking through into the world – just like the light that appears right at the start of the bible, as we heard in our Genesis reading. That's what these epiphanies were about – people seeing God's light break through.

And who was it in these events, birth, adoration, baptism, who had this sudden realisation, who saw the light?

It wasn't the people in charge, the people with power. The gospel writers tell us again and again it was ordinary people, the marginalised, the outsiders, who realised what was actually happening to them.

When Jesus was born, we're told it was ordinary, scruffy shepherds who realised something extraordinary was happening; who saw the light of God in a baby's eyes.

When Jesus was an infant, we're told he was visited by the magi. They were not kings, according to the bible. It's only in later centuries that Christians imagined them as kings because of the extravagant gifts they brought. What they were in reality is outsiders. They were scholars outside the Jewish people; they were not the sort of

people who were thought to have true insight into the work of God. But *these* were the people who God called to come and see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Later on, when Jesus was an adult and came to the river to be baptised, it was ordinary peasants who realised that here was God come to them.

And it was the same in another event traditionally celebrated during Epiphanytide – the wedding at Cana, where Jesus was said to turn water into wine. It was another quiet moment when something of Jesus' identity was revealed. And it wasn't the rich people at the wedding who saw the miracle, but the ordinary servants.

Ordinary people who encountered ordinary things – a baby, a man by the river, water in a jar – ordinary things, but which, they realised, were not ordinary at all, but extraordinary. They revealed that God had come to them.

That's what we celebrate in this new season. At Christmas we celebrated God breaking into history, in a very particular, scandalous way – as a human baby. In the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the ways God continues to break into our lives every day; the ways he continues to reveal himself through ordinary things.

I had a moment like that just before Christmas, at Warm Welcome, our community drop-in on Wednesdays. We were singing carols around the piano. It was a bunch of ordinary people from different walks of life, who wouldn't usually meet, some of them going through very hard times. But here they were, together, singing with joy. That was a mini epiphany for me, because I realized that this wasn't ordinary at all, but extraordinary. Because God was working here, in this space, healing people through his love.

As we enter this season of Epiphany, we'll be walking from the manger, to the riverbank, to the wedding feast. And as we go, we're invited to look again at the ordinary places in our lives. The places or people we may have taken for granted; but actually, within them, if we look closer, the light of God is revealing itself to us. We're invited to open ourselves up to the epiphanies of God all around us.

Amen.