

Baptism of Christ 8 Jan 2012

Over the past two Sundays I've been asked by other clergy I happen to meet, what I was 'doing' on the coming Sundays. In other words they were asking was I going to celebrate, the First Sunday of Christmas or the feast of the Circumcision and the Naming of Jesus last week and Epiphany or the Baptism of Christ today. Chatting to Michael Bester on Friday, he pointed out that in the Orthodox Church the Feast of Epiphany has nothing to do with the three kings, Wise Men or magi and is in fact the celebration of the Baptism of Christ. I check this out in my OED which said: "Epiphany - A Christian festival observed on 6 January, in the Orthodox Church commemorating the baptism of Jesus and in the Western Church the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi." A second meaning is: "A manifestation of some divine or superhuman being." So in fact both the manifestation of Christ and the baptism of Christ would be appropriate for the nearest Sunday to Epiphany which occurred on Friday.

Epiphany opens up divine revelation to all of us. All people are able experience God's glory. Through the showing of Christ to the Kings and by the very events at Jesus' baptism, the divine is revealed and this revelation is built into our reality. And God, who is omnipresent and defined by relational love not unilateral power, seeks the well-being of all creation and humankind with no exceptions. Although God is everywhere it does not mean that God's revelation will be the same for everyone. All are touched, all are welcomed, and all are inspired. Yet, there are some people who are more able to fully experience and express God's vision for humankind than others. This does not depend on our responsiveness; it is also the character of God's call to us. The Celts speak of certain places as "thin places," environments where heaven and earth, divinity and creation, are transparent to one another. Do you remember Jacob's response following his mystical experience of a ladder of angels; "God was in this place" he says and names the place – Beth-el – the gate of heaven.

The lessons this Sunday present to us an interesting conglomeration of events which seem at first disconnected to the Baptism of Christ that we are celebrating. Today we are fortunate to be able to baptise Princess Ifeyinwa on this special Sunday when we do commemorate the Baptism of Christ. This makes the whole idea of baptism very real for us - not merely a description given in Mark's Gospel. But how real is baptism for you? For most of us our own Baptism was many years ago, before we were old enough to remember. Many of those baptised here at St Paul's in the past seven years since I've been here, I haven't seen since the Sunday they were baptised. Does this make their baptism invalid? Do we have to be baptised before we can believe? The reality is that God-seekers and even fellow Christians who have not been baptised also experience God's revelation. We cannot make rules for God. "Sorry Lord but you cannot speak through that person because they haven't been baptised yet!"

We also have to remember that baptism is not uniform in practice – our tradition emphasizes baptism as a sacrament and infant baptism as a source of unmerited grace, while others accentuate the importance of decision and community through believer's baptism. Both are clearly authentic and both have precedent in the biblical tradition.

So, do our bible lessons today help us understand more about Jesus' baptism in relationship to our own baptism? In all three lessons, the Holy Spirit is the agent of creation: form and light, new life, and new capacities for ministry.

Genesis, Chapter One, reminds us that divine creativity – the source of our quest for salvation – emerges with the beginnings of the universe. In the language of myth and poetry, Genesis 1:1-5 describes the creation of the earth as the interplay of movement and word. A divine wind blows over an unformed chaos bringing order, beauty, and the prerequisites for future creation. This is not about chronology (whether in seven days or not) but about creativity. Divine creativity always works within the elements of the universe, seeking forth to bring forth the best from them. Even the primordial chaos is attentive to the divine voice. The Word – spoken at creation, spoke at Jesus' baptism. And this morning at the Baptism of Princess Ifeyinwa, we may not hear a vocal voice; we may not see the Spirit descending like a dove; but I believe God still utters the affirmation, "This is my beloved child with whom I am well-pleased."

Out of water our lives emerge and from the waters of baptism, we experience spiritual refreshment as we emerge into a new life in Christ. Water is a wonderful symbol, or outward sign of this sacrament because water brings us physical refreshment on a hot day, so the waters of Baptism bring us spiritual refreshment. But it is more than that. I saw this wonderful quotation, "Baptism is not a bath, but a funeral bier. If it was a bath, you would need it again and again. But since it is a death and new life, it is a once for all picture of the transformation that has taken place in our lives."

Psalms 29 describes God's creative and powerful voice. Those at the River Jordan with Jesus when he was baptised say that a voice came from heaven saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' But God spoke and saw that it was good. A divine creativity moves through all things, gives all things life and inspires them. The broad environment of our lives is God-inspired and God-filled. We don't have to worry about the regularity of the universe or the patterns of seedtime and harvest. They are reflections of God's faithfulness in the non-human as well as human worlds.

In our second reading, from Acts 19, the focus is on the relationship between baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit as an experiential reality. What do I mean by that? I mean, experiencing the mystical and ecstatic movements of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As Paul baptizes a group of Ephesians, the Holy Spirit takes hold of them, giving them the power to speak in tongues and prophesy. Perhaps this scripture is challenging for us today because few of us identify baptism with ecstatic experiences. Did you have an ecstatic experience with your baptism? We don't expect a dove coming down from the sky, a voice of affirmation, or the ability to speak in strange tongues as the result of the act of baptism but as I've said already I think it still happens.

Still, the passage suggests that we should be on the lookout for mystical experiences whenever we celebrate the sacraments – visible signs of an invisible grace. Can I reassure you that lacking such Pentecostal experiences does not make us lesser Christians, but we should be open to going beyond our spiritual comfort zones to experience God more fully in the world – that is our reality as baptised Christians.

And so onto Mark's Gospel reading which describes Jesus' baptism. As I've said, God's words to Jesus reflect God's care for our lives – "you are my Son, my Daughter, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." While the sacraments awaken us to God's love, they don't define the scope of God's love. In the interplay of divine call and human response, sacramental moments may lead to life-transforming experiences, bringing wholeness to body, mind, spirit, and communities. Sacraments create a field of force around us and our loved ones that enable God and us to become partners in creative transformation and personal and planetary healing. That is what mean by the 'thin places' I referred to earlier.

We must remember that baptism is not an occasion for Christian superiority or exclusivism. We must remember that there is salvation – and revelation – outside the church. Even those who have not been baptised – those seeking God and those persons currently alienated from the church – are God's beloved people in whom, with whom, and through whom God is still moving. Every cell and every soul is the object of God's creative-responsive love.

Baptism reminds us that God's graces are "new **every** morning." As the Lambeth Conference of 1968 said, "baptism is not merely a rite of a moment but is the principle of a lifetime." While typically a once in a lifetime event, each day should be a celebration of our baptism. Epiphany means manifestation of who Jesus is. The divinity of Jesus is made manifest or made known at his baptism and becomes a reality for us as his spirit moves in our lives, luring us forward by the vision of wholeness, justice, beauty, and peace.