



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Epiphany

Ephesians 3. 1-12. Matthew 2.1-12

& The Baptism of Christ Epiphany 1

Acts 19.1-7 Mark 1.4-11

This week we have two important days in the church calendar, on January 6th it was the Epiphany and on Sunday the Baptism of Christ is remembered. Holy Innocents was December 28th but I include it here because it is inextricably bound with the visit of the Magi.

The beginning of each of the gospels differs, only two begin with the account of the birth. Matthew's gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, and it then moves on to the angel's meeting with Joseph and his explanation of the wonder of the Christ child to him, followed by the story set for the Epiphany of the visit of the Magi. Luke begins with the account of the angel's visit to Zechariah, the conception of John by Mary's relative Elizabeth, the annunciation and a full account of the birth, though there is no mention of the visit of the Magi. Mark begins when Jesus is an adult with the introduction of John the Baptist fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah:

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

St. John of course begins with 'The unfolding of the great mystery of the incarnation' and then moves on to John the Baptist.

This may sound like preamble but actually it is very important. The beginnings of the gospels may seem very different but actually they do have several things in common. The gospel writers are all at pains to point out that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and the Son of God. Matthew's long genealogy would have been vital in Jewish culture. Jesus is descended from King David; he is of the

royal line. Herod the Great is most definitely not. He got his kingship through fighting and being appointed by the Romans. He was a foul and brutal dictator. His 'slaughter of the innocents,' is remembered by the Western church on December 28th. Historians argue about the authenticity of it but Matthew in his account is very specific; indeed it would have been typical of him, he had three of his own sons killed! It indicates the dangerous world into which Jesus was born and of course Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt for safety.

This Reflection is different as I want to take an overview of the Epiphany readings and those set for the Baptism of Christ. An epiphany moment is, 'a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization:' that is it in a nutshell. We have seen the account of the visit of the shepherds to the stable and their realisation that this child is the one foretold by the prophets,

'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'

Their reaction is to rush back and tell everyone they meet.

In Matthew's gospel we have the story of the Magi, 'wise men from the east.' This is the only gospel in which they appear. We are told that they arrive after the birth and after, we presume a long and arduous journey. This is captured perfectly in TS Elliot's poem, 'The journey of the Magi.' 'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.' The word Magi is derived from a Persian priestly sect who specialised in examining the stars, or astrology. It is conjecture of course but fits with, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' They have seen this star which they believe to be the herald of a great event, the birth of a great ruler. So naturally they go to Herod's court in Jerusalem. It might be natural but it is highly dangerous. The one thing that dictators with absolute power fear is losing it. That is the cause of so much brutality and bullying in this world. Some people tend to cling to power anyhow and at any cost.

'When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; '

So he asks just who this child is – he certainly knows nothing of it. He is told of the prophecies

' "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

We see the cunning of this man as he lulls the Magi into a sense of security saying he wishes to worship the king when he in fact intends to wipe out any threat. If we look forward in the passage to v 16 we are told of the massacre of the innocents, reminiscent of Pharaoh's destruction of the children.

¹⁶ 'When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,

Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

The visit of the Magi is always tinged with great sadness as the birth of the Saviour of humanity happens with rejoicing for those who witness it yet others die because of man's inhumanity to man. The Magi are oblivious as yet of Herod's evil intentions, 'When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.' This is the epiphany moment. This child is no ordinary child and one wonders just how this epiphany will affect their lives in the future. I have used this poem in Epiphany services and the last verses read,

'Journey we three new made men, side by side.
Came we by old paths by the sands.
Go we by new ones this new day,
homewards to rule over our lives and land
another way.' Author unknown.

The gifts seem strange ones but we all know their significance, specifically the incense, which is the sign of God's presence. If we look at the Old Testament reading set for the Isaiah 60.1-6 it says,

'Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
'They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.'

One wonders if this is where the old tradition that the Magi were kings evolved from.

The prophecy is fulfilled here. One of the wonderful central truths of the Epiphany is that yes Jesus did come, 'To the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Matthew 15. 24. But what happened? Tragically most of them rejected him; they simply refused to recognise their long awaited Messiah. As St. John says, ¹⁰ 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

This is the wonderful truth; everyone who does believe receives the full grace of God and all that Jesus won for us at Calvary and at the resurrection. We are all God's children and heirs with Christ. The Magi are Gentiles and here Jesus, man and God is revealed to Gentiles.

Here is the link to the reading from Ephesians 3 which begins, 'This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles,' and he goes on, 'the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Jesus Christ in the gospel. 'The gospel' means the good news of Jesus Christ. 'St. Paul, the greatest missionary of all time was indeed the, 'Apostle to the Gentiles,' v.8.

Paul is at pains to make clear that this plan to make the Gentiles co-heirs was NOT an afterthought. It was God's intention from the beginning. ¹¹'this was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,'

¹² 'To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

This is the wonderful Good News for us all, that from the beginning of time we have been called to be sons and daughters of God, loved by him and cared for by him. We are heirs with Jesus who died and rose again for us. We are given the great gift of God's Holy Spirit and Jesus is with us now.

The gospel reading set for the Baptism of Christ is from the beginning of St. Mark's gospel. Mark, the writer of the earliest gospel, makes Christ's divinity clear at the outset,

'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

His immediate focus is on John the Baptist, because John is 'the herald of Good Tidings,' he is the one who is foretold by Isaiah, the one who will, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' Each one of the gospels focuses on John. Matthew tells of the birth, the visit of the Magi and their avoidance of Herod at the end, the flight into Egypt and safety of the holy family and then the return to Nazareth. Chapter 3 opens, 'In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Luke is very specific placing him in history, ³ 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.'

John is so important that is why Mark opens with his witness. We are told at once what John's baptism is about, repentance. To repent means to turn, so he is saying turn your back on sin and turn to God. He is indeed preparing the way for the Messiah. The water is symbolic; it is not only washing away sin, but represents release from the captivity of it, just as the Israelites were released from the captivity and slavery in Egypt when they crossed the Red Sea as God delivered them.

We are told what John is like, ⁶ 'Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.' As a youngster I always found him scary. Well he was forceful and uncompromising, he had to be. He had a job to do, he was appointed by God to do it. He stood up for what was right, he challenged what was wrong. It took courage. He challenged authority, it was dangerous in the extreme and when he stood up to the king he was treated in the way of most people who dare to challenge power, verse 14 begins, 'Now after John was arrested.'

John was the one who was to announce the coming of the Messiah, the representative of the people, their King and Saviour, the Anointed One for whom the Jews were waiting. The prophets had foretold his coming. However there is no doubt that people, particularly the leaders, had their own image of what they wanted the Messiah to be.

John announces boldly, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.'

John certainly causes a stir, people flock to him, ⁵ 'And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.' This arouses the interest not just of the ordinary people but of the leaders. The Pharisees get the sharp edge of his tongue. ⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' Matthew 3

John has no aspirations beyond his appointed task as we see in St. John's gospel, 'This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' ²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' He knows exactly who he is, the one foretold by Isaiah, the one who prepares the way, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

This the key point. John baptises with water of repentance, the Messiah will fill people with the Holy Spirit of God.

So we have the meeting with John on the bank of The River Jordan, Jesus is baptised by him even though John says that he is not fit to. Actually we are none of us 'fit' to be cause we are none of us perfect but we carry out our ministries whatever they may be in God's grace.

⁹ 'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ 'And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the loving God pouring out his love on the beloved. I think this is the image of God we should keep in mind. It is after his baptism when strengthened with God's Holy Spirit that Jesus goes out to face the trials in the wilderness.

In the reading from Acts Paul focuses on the difference between John's baptism and that of Jesus. The setting is Ephesus; Paul comes across 'some disciples.' They are obviously a community, desirous of being Christians but they are so 'young ' in the faith. They really do not understand the rudiments of it.

To Paul's question, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' they reply, 'No we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

It is hard for us to envisage now perhaps but these were people in a completely different culture that had heard of this new belief then called 'The Way.' They certainly knew of John the Baptist. They believed in his baptism for repentance but their understanding of Jesus and Christianity and the promises of God were to say the least of it totally undeveloped. They were probably actually really ignorant of it. But they do desire to follow the new way and that in a totally hostile environment and culture. How wonderful then is this meeting with Paul.

The baptism Paul baptises is that of Jesus Christ, no one else. That must be made clear to them. He explains exactly what John did, he baptised for repentance of sins, to prepare the way for Jesus, but he does not give the Holy Spirit. Only baptism in the name of Jesus the Messiah who is part of the divine God can do that. That is exactly what John said when he was baptizing as we have just seen. So Paul baptises them in Jesus' name and we are told, 'The Holy Spirit' came upon them.

Whenever I conduct a baptism I am always profoundly moved. I always explain that it is the same Holy Spirit that will descend in this baptism as did on Jesus at the River Jordan. This newly baptised person is baptised in the name of the Trinitarian God and receives the full promises of God. Actually baptism is, 'Ordination to the holy priesthood of all believers.'

The Holy Spirit is a life changer; it should be seen in our behaviour as it was with these twelve. That doesn't mean necessarily speaking in tongues or prophesying. It does mean that our behaviour should be tuned to the way of Christ so that people should be able to look at us and know that we are trying to follow the pattern of Jesus in our lives. As Christians we need to keep reminding ourselves of that. Jesus challenged people again and again not only to believe but to live it out in their behaviour, their attitudes, their decisions and their lives. The same holds true for us. We have to keep measuring ourselves and our behaviour in the light of what we profess, in the light of Jesus' way. Where we find ourselves wanting we need to do something about it. Complacency was and always is a danger.

That is our commission that is our challenge.

I received a beautiful book of Celtic blessings for Christmas. I would like to share this one with you. Apparently Colonel 'Buzz' Aldrin took it to the moon. It is called, 'The prayer of protection.' It seemed appropriate for this year.

'May the light of God surround us, the love of God enfold us, the power of God protect us, the presence of God watch over us. Wherever we are God is.' James Freeman

And also this quotation from Numbers 27.1

'You Lord are the light that keeps me safe, I am not afraid of anyone. You protect me and I have no fears.'

~~~~~