

Sermon: Jesus – the glory of God
Genesis 1.1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11
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Epiphany means *revelation from above*. It is one of the old feasts of the Christian church. The first celebrations we know of date from the second century.

There have always been regional differences in how it was celebrated but the heart of the feast always had to do with the *public revelation of the divinity of Jesus*.

Whereas with *Christmas* we consider how God became truly human in Jesus, with *Epiphany* we worship him for being the Son of God at the same time. The eastern churches call the feast therefore *Theophany*, the revelation of God.

Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373) in one of his 'church laws' for the proper behavior of Bishops:

At the feast of the Lord's Epiphany, the bishops shall rejoice [...] for it is a day of blessing; in it the Lord was baptized by John [and in it] our Savior appeared as God, when, by a wondrous miracle, He made water into wine.

He made water into wine: from early times in Church history, the Bible story of the wedding party at Kana was commemorated during Epiphany. Jesus changed water into wine. This was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs. John 2:11 says: 'He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.'

According to some early Christian writers, the celebration of the feast was often marked by a repetition of that same miracle as water in the homes and churches of the Christians was changed into wine. Some say that even whole rivers changed into wine on 6 January.

Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, in Northern Cyprus, who had for a while been a monk in Egypt, wrote around the year 370 that even the whole Nile was once, on 6 January, changed into wine. Now that miracle would put Giannaclis and the Al-Ahram Beverage Company out of work.

Beside the miracle at Kana, the Baptism of Jesus was the reason to celebrate Epiphany. At that beginning of Jesus' public ministry his divinity was for the first time revealed.

Setting of the Baptism

We would expect the revelation of the divinity of Jesus to be a solemn event. Something to be done in the Temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus' glory was first revealed when he was baptized in the Jordan River by John. John we know as a man wearing a camelhair coat, and feasting on

locusts with wild honey as a desert. In the days of John and Jesus, eating locusts was not done by society in Jerusalem.

John probably followed some old Jewish traditions of total dedication to God – as a hermit, and he reminded many people of the Old Testament prophets, of Elijah maybe, so for refined society he was not the in-thing.

In the meantime, the masses of Judah and Jerusalem were attracted to him. The atmosphere of religious expectations must have been high. The land was occupied by Roman armies. Some violent liberation movements were fighting the Roman.

Apocalyptic preachers promised great changes in the land, promising fire and brimstone for God's enemies. No wonder that many people wanted to convert and receive forgiveness, in preparation for all that.

Mark says: 'the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John.' Mark was using a broad paintbrush here, describing how large numbers of people came to be baptized.

The masses came. Luke used that word to describe the large numbers of people that came for baptism. That word 'the masses' was used by the religious leaders of Israel in a derogatory way. The masses were the people who did not live according to the fine print of the religious laws of those days. For them there was no place in the religious life of Israel.

The pious Jewish leaders would not touch those people as touching those made them unfit to serve God. You could never know whether you might, for instance, touch a woman in her days of her monthly period or someone who touched that woman, or someone who touched someone who touched such a woman. Doing that would make you unclean for a week.

John preached that all people had to come and be baptized, and he announced forgiveness of sins to those who repented. And the masses came. In modern terms, we could speak of a real revival movement.

Saint John's church's was growing! Well, not really. John was not growing a church. He underlined that someone else was to come after him, who was the *real* hope for Israel. The one to come would baptize people with the Holy Spirit, not just with water.

Did the people understand what John was saying? I guess yes, to a certain extent. I think

many were aware of the words of Old Testament prophets like Joel, whose promises were discussed over and over again in Jerusalem and Judah by those who wanted to be liberated from the Roman yoke and who looked forward to a renewal of religious life in Israel.

Joel had, hundreds of years before, promised a change in the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, and punishment for the nations that occupied Judah. He had also promised that if Jerusalem would repent, Jahweh, the God of Israel himself, would one day pour out his Spirit on all people. All this was what the people who came for baptism were hoping for!

The Baptism of Jesus

Then Jesus came. At Epiphany we see his glory. When He was baptized heaven was torn open, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. And from the open heavens a voice was heard: 'You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.'

The church has from the earliest days spoken of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God, as it realized that the three could not be thought of without underlining their intimate unity.

In the eastern churches, on the evening of 6 January a special hymn is sung, the Troparion:

When You, O Lord were baptized in the Jordan
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest
For the voice of the Father bore witness to You
And called You His beloved Son.
And the Spirit, in the form of a dove,
Confirmed the truthfulness of His word.

We celebrate that Jesus is Son of God, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is God from God, light from light. He is the Lord of the Church, and the Lord of our life. The Son of God has from eternal times been with the Father and with the Holy Spirit in a communal unity. Even the first verses of the Bible testify to that. The God who is Three-in-One created all there is.

The Bible opens with the words 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. In those verses, we also read how the Spirit of God was at work in creation. We also see God's Word at work. God's speech is powerful and effective. He speaks and there is light.

So here is Jesus, Son of God, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, to be *baptized*? Is that not utterly strange? The Lord of the Universe, who was not in need of repentance of things done or of things left undone.

The most important reason why Jesus chose to be baptized was that from the beginning of his public ministry, He wanted to rub shoulders with people and be one with them. He had come to

take the sins of humanity on his shoulders, and when he was baptized,

He began a process that would end in his crucifixion. As the beginning of His redemptive work, Jesus was baptized to be in complete unity with the people he came to redeem.

Unlike the religious leaders of Israel, Jesus did not distance himself from the masses that were created and loved by God. By coming to baptism, he had to push himself through the crowds. In the eyes of many devout Jews, and according to the laws of Moses, Jesus defiled himself and he disqualified himself for prayer and for any service of God.

But Jesus did *not* become unclean, rather, those whom He touched were cleansed. Lepers, sinful women, unclean men, normal people who were less than perfect, Jesus loved them, touched them, embraced them.

What comfort to us. As far as God is concerned we, less than perfect people, all absolutely perfectly 100% qualify for receiving his love and grace. How that lifts us up! It lifts us up, because He was prepared to go down. First in Baptism. From the start of his ministry, he embraced that humiliation. He became weak, for our sake. In this humbling baptism, and later to an even fuller extent in his awful crucifixion, that is exactly where He lifts us up. That is where we meet with God - between the baptism of Jesus and his crucifixion.

These masses that came for baptism to John show us the best of man's sincerity and religious feelings. But being baptized with the masses was not something sweet or nice for Jesus. These were the same masses that three years later clamored for Jesus to be killed. They came to ask for forgiveness, and three years later they wanted the author of forgiveness dead. 'Crucify him crucify him', they shouted. So much for our pious religious feelings.

For all mankind

The glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that he *does* rub shoulders with people like that.

People with their ups and downs. Today a saint, tomorrow a demon. People with enormously developed religious sensitivities today, but who can be utterly bad tomorrow.

His grace is for people like us. What a reason to praise God! Psalm 29 calls us to praise God for who He is:

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of his
holiness.

The first people came to worship the Lord after his birth were the Magi – kings from the east. Church tradition has also linked Epiphany to the visit of these Magi. They probably came from Babylon or what is now called Iraq, to seek the one who would be a light to the nations.

These occult, pagan Magi were among the first people that were blessed with knowledge of the gospel. They were also the first non-Jews to take the Gospel to their own lands. Epiphany is a feast of mission. The Good News that God's own Son came to this world for the salvation of sinners must be proclaimed throughout the world.

After the Magi, the first missionaries of the early church were the same people who had shouted for Jesus' crucifixion and who betrayed him. In the weeks and months after the crucifixion of Christ in Jerusalem, thousands upon thousands of people from Jerusalem and Judah came to faith in Him. They had seen God before their own eyes when they saw Jesus – crucified and resurrected.

They came to faith in Him, and so did people all over the world. There are no nations where there are no Christians nowadays. The world is flocked by people who were once enemies of Christ, but who have become followers of Jesus because when they looked at Him in his weakest moment, on the cross. There they saw God at work.

Conclusion

And we who have met God in the face of Jesus Christ, we partake in his mission. Our weakness is no hindrance for God be with us and use us. Our awareness of our incompleteness and weakness is rather the building block that God needs. John the Baptist promised those who listened to him, that Jesus would give the Holy Spirit.

Those who came to faith in Jesus in early church history received the Holy Spirit in their life, as an always present companion.

And we who believe in Jesus, have that same Spirit of God as a treasure in our life. My faith may be weak, and I may be imperfect, but the Holy Spirit is at work in my life.

God the Father has sent his Son to this World. The Son of God embraced mankind, offering forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit of God is with us who believe. What a great feast to celebrate.

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit