

Sunday 8 January 2006: The First Sunday of Epiphany

A baptism and a new beginning

Readings: Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11

Thursday was Twelfth Night and on Friday we moved from Christmas to Epiphany. With the building work starting tomorrow, Matthew Whalley, our Treasurer, suggested that what we needed this year was Magi bringing gifts of gold, gold and gold. Of course, 'epiphany' means 'making known' and Matthew, both the Gospel and perhaps our Treasurer, uses the story of the Magi to make known at the outset the direction Jesus will take us. At the end of Matthew's Gospel the risen Jesus, in what has become called 'the great commission', sends his disciples to make disciples of all nations baptising people everywhere in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". So this is the direction we are given at the start, with these non-Jews, Gentiles, coming from the East, probably from Persia. They give us the eyes to see that Jesus is for all the world and the gifts they bring tell us who this child will be: gold for a king, incense for God and myrrh for the person who will die for us.

Today's readings are also an epiphany, a making known of Christ at the outset, this time at his baptism. The beginning of Mark's Gospel, the Gospel we will be reading most Sundays this year, doesn't start with the birth of Jesus but with the baptism of the adult Jesus. It's fantastically immediate. Bang:

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..."

John the Baptist in the wilderness, the last of the prophets, pointing to Jesus as the Christ and baptising him with water...

"And just as he was coming out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove...And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

This is an epiphany, making known who Jesus is. It is fantastically exciting and has enormous energy. How could any of us resist being dragged along by the sheer pace of the story? We're there; and Baptism becomes the way we are there in our own Christian lives, the beginning of our own engagements with this extraordinary person, Jesus.

Now exactly how that is so took a bit of working out in the early Church. Go back over this morning's two readings carefully and what you can feel the argument.

- John baptised with water for the forgiveness of sins.
- Jesus was sinless so his baptism by John was not to forgive his sins but to reveal who Jesus is.
- God did this by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are no accounts of Jesus baptising his disciples but through his life, death, resurrection and ascension his followers, disciples, are brought to Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. So being baptised as a follower of Jesus does indeed bring the Holy Spirit upon us.

In the early Church they were sometimes overly impressed with the rather flashy gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy and that's exactly what we heard in the reading from Acts. But quickly the early Church came to see that what mattered much more were the rather more important gifts: faith hope and love (1 Corinthians 13); "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians.5.22); *and* what was said to be the great gift of the first Pentecost, the gift of communication between diverse people gathered in Jerusalem who didn't speak the same language but who understood each other on the first Pentecost. How urgently we need that today in both the Church and world.

So what baptism is about is a new beginning, like a new year and the beginning of a new Gospel. Who we are is revealed to us: we are called by name; we are joined to the way of Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection; and we are engaged with God's continuing creativity through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of a baby this morning is perfect timing. She gives all of us an opportunity to make the most significant of new year's resolution and renew our own Baptismal promises.

Now not everything about little Sofia's arrival into this world could be said to have been perfect timing but her baptism is as good as it gets. Sofia's grandfather, Ian Henderson, is the Chairman of our Development Trust. He has been involved with our building project since its conception and no one has done more to bring the project to birth. Whilst we've still got a lot of fundraising to do over the next two years, tomorrow the builders start on site, engaging us physically with God's continuing creativity. The first phase is to demolish the nineteenth century burial vaults under the courtyard and create a new foyer which will be the way in to the whole underground complex, and a parish hall, chapel, music rehearsal room, Chinese People's Day Centre, education and meeting rooms as well as kitchen and the plant room for the boilers. So, you'll understand that it feels to me as though we are baptising more than a baby this morning. It's got to be a good omen that Sofia is from a family of builders, a McAlpine, and she and her family will have to be characteristically generous that our builders are Costain's!

After Jesus's baptism Mark says, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan." Well, for us it's going to be more than 40 days if not in the wilderness then on a construction site; at least two years. And I've said all along that there will be times when we wonder why on earth we are doing it, so I suppose that's temptation. As with children there will be unasked-for opportunities for interruptions, mess, challenges and expense. As with the gift of a child there will be blessings and the gift of life both now and for the future.

Today, in the new year, beginning to read the Gospel of Mark, and baptising Sofia on the eve of the builders coming on site, we are committing ourselves to a making new of ourselves, this place, and the creative work of God in St Martin-in-the-Fields. It is an 'epiphany', a making known of God here in London for repentance, a turning back towards God, for the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To God be the glory now and in eternity through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen