

Sunday 7th January 2024; Benefice BCP HC Stonegrave.

Epiphany/ Baptism of Christ

Today is one of those occasions when we have not one but two significant events in our church calendar; Epiphany, which strictly speaking was yesterday 6th January, and today the Baptism of Christ.

Hopefully then I can weave the two together today. Firstly, Epiphany which means, revelation, being astonished – an unexpected moment of clarity that makes you see and understand things in a new and transformative way, a eureka moment that will change, guide, and shape your life from now on. It was these events that the mystics down the centuries experienced, and we also see it in the Bible accounts when God spoke to individuals such as the prophets and changed their lives. When these moments occur, the person connects to the deepest mystery of God. Epiphany literally means ‘Heaven opens.’

In Matthew’s gospel this revelation is witnessed first, not by the religious or political rulers of the day but by strangers from far away, Gentile Magi who come seeking the new ‘King of the Jews’, and when they find him, they worship him. They find him not in a palace, in the expected place, but ‘God with us’ in the unexpected place.

The Epiphany story is about how God is found not at the centre of power but at the margins, not in the certainty of cultural and religious safety and conformity, but beyond the boundaries where new relationships and discoveries are made, where the powerful bow down and kneel before a small child.

Because the Magi pay attention, and they go and speak about what they have seen their lives are changed.

Heaven was opened to them. They point the way for us to do the same as we too encounter this revelation of 'God with us' and allow the beauty and mystery of that revelation to guide and direct our lives so that we also can reveal God's presence and light to the world too. We too can open Heaven's doors to the world.

Similarly, at his baptism, we are told when Jesus himself came to be baptised the heavens are opened. The heavens are opened for us too, like entering a new dimension of living, for yourself but also beyond yourself. God's world enters your world, and you experience God's love breaking down the barriers. Now, the veil between you and God has been torn apart. There is a new height, depth and breadth opening up. Epiphany is now, Heaven is opened. It's like Jacobs ladder in which the transcendent mystery of God connects with our own lives and souls. It's like those wise men reaching the stable and suddenly seeing the connection between the star and the miracle of the Christ child. It's like Mary realising that God has broken into her life in a way she never imagined possible. It's like you or I realising we are no longer defined by our sin or failures, or our limitations but that the life and the kingdom of Heaven are opened for us too. The human response to this is spiritual Joy. We hear the magi are 'overwhelmed with joy' when they reach their destination, the place where Jesus is. Their first response on seeing the child is to fall to their knees and to worship him as they allow the truth of what they see to transform them.

In this transformation, in their astonishment and worship, in their telling about what they see, the world that rests on structures of power, privilege and might is seen as a world that rests on this child, this humble gift for all, a light for all the world, worshipped in the Christ child here on earth opening Heaven to us all.

We too are invited to pay attention, to be astonished and talk about this gift in lives of loving humble service, to be where the light is, to follow faithfully. Last week at the end of the year I spoke of seeking to find our who we are and to whom we belong. Today at Epiphany, in this revelation of the incarnation, of Christ come to be with us, he shows us who he is, and who we are, in his light. Our response can only be to be astonished and amazed and to bow our knee and worship too.

God's revelation, the Epiphany, the coming of the Dove upon Jesus at his baptism and the words of His Father doesn't abolish the mystery. Like the Magi transformed by the ordinary, but also extraordinary presence of God in Christ in the manger, God's revelation makes it possible to see that mystery in everything. Epiphany tells us to pay attention to all that God wishes to reveal of his love and wonder; in the child, in the person of Jesus Christ, to be astonished and filled with praise and be Christ's light and love and open Heaven for all the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.