

# EPIPHANY 1

YouTube link: [https://youtu.be/Q\\_MfLpdxzyU](https://youtu.be/Q_MfLpdxzyU)

## **Genesis 1:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

## **Mark 1.4-11**

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, ‘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. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

## **The Baptism of Jesus**

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

My text is written in Mark 1:11:

<sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

Last Wednesday on 6<sup>th</sup> January, was the Feast of the Epiphany, and in the West, since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, it has been associated with the revelation of the incarnation of God in Jesus to the Gentiles, as symbolised by the visit of the Magi or the wise men. It actually originated in the East before then, where the focus was (and still is) on the Baptism of Jesus – which is the theme of our Gospel reading today. In the West, this feast day is also associated with 12<sup>th</sup> Night or Epiphany Eve, when people remove their Christmas decorations. In some Protestant Churches the season of the Epiphany lasts from 6<sup>th</sup> January, right up to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Roman Catholics only observe it as a single day, with the Sundays following being regarded as part of ‘Ordinary Time’.

Today’s reading is traditional in both the East and the West for the season of the Epiphany because it is all about the revelation of the incarnation of God in the world in Jesus. Mark has no references to the birth of Jesus at all, and says nothing about the visit of the Magi, which probably took place at some time up to two years after the birth of Jesus. Instead, he is in a hurry to explain that Jesus is the Good News of the revelation of God to the whole world, and people of every generation. As Samuel Massey wrote:

Think of all that has been done in the name of Jesus Christ and how inconspicuously the Gospel begins according to Mark. Here we find none of the thunderous poetry used by John to describe the pre-existent Christ. We dream no dreams and no angels visit with us. Caesar Augustus and Herod seem pretty far away. No excuse here for Christmas trees or mob-ridden malls or long hours putting together services of lessons and carols ...! All Mark offers to us is John the Baptist, many people's worst nightmare, smelling like a camel and calling people to change their ways.

This passage stands apart from the rest of the Gospel as a sort of curtain raiser in which the reader is introduced to the context, so that, when the curtain goes up in verse 14, they will already know who the lead character is, and can understand the significance of the message they are about to receive. Knowing this background, makes it clear, obvious even, why the baptism of Jesus has been central to this season since the earliest times. As Nineham explains: Mark believed that, in Jesus, God had begun his '... final intervention in history, the first, but decisive stage in the overthrow of the powers of evil and the establishment of God's Sovran rule.'

On the Second Sunday in Advent a few weeks ago, our reading included verses 4-8 of today's Gospel, and so I do not need to explore these verses again, other than a brief comment to explain the context of the Baptism of Jesus. But I would like to pick up the common theme as explained in all the Gospels, albeit in different ways, and that is the importance of God's revelation to the world, how this happened, and its relevance for our message to the world today.

*Firstly*, we are reminded of the importance of the Christian focus on wisdom. As Sir John Polkinghorne has pointed out, the Magi were seekers after truth. He adds:

It took the learned sages somewhat longer than the unlearned shepherds to find their way to Bethlehem, but they got there in the end. Christian faith is not a matter of theological cleverness, but the Church has always rightfully had a place in its ranks for those whose vocation is the scrupulous search for truth.

According to many who have turned their backs on Christianity, it has often been the superficial way some Christians deal with the complexities of life, often with random cherry-picked verses from the Bible in support, that has put them off. An example is the way even some of our unfair critics have in fact made a valid point, when they say that the insistence of some Christians to reject the scientific evidence for evolution – which is clear, deeply thought through, and the product of rigorous research and peer review – in favour of “The Bible says ...” simply does not make any sense. The opening verses of Genesis chapter 1 are particularly relevant. Some people reject the theory of evolution in favour of a literal understanding of these verses, even though there is also a vast amount of evidence to show that the authors and compilers of Genesis, never intended them to be interpreted literally in this way.

When one searches for wisdom and truth in these verses of Genesis, we come to realise something wonderful and beautiful, and that is how the authors and editors knew that what they were writing about, could not be reduced to the words of any human language. So, they needed a poetic medium that might enable exploration into these truths that are (and probably always will be) beyond human understanding. The reason why these verses are included in the readings for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the Epiphany, is that this same God, who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth – the whole universe – had entered our world and was about

to reveal the truth and wisdom of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – the Christ. For Mark, the central fact of the history of humankind, was about to be revealed to the world.

*Secondly*, because John’s Baptism was one calling sinners to repent and change their ways, this begs the questions: “Why then, was Jesus Baptised?” “Was Jesus just an ordinary human being like everyone else, and imperfect like us, and in need of repentance?” “Was it only from this point onwards that Jesus was *adopted* as God’s son?” “Was it the Holy Spirit that now made Jesus different to the rest of us?” ... and more!

But we can know several things for sure by way of addressing these questions, the most significant being, that this is *not* what Mark (or any of the other New Testament writers) believed. The message of the New Testament, and the church down the ages, is that from even before the birth of the human Jesus, as well as throughout his *whole* life on earth, he had always been divine. Jesus did not *need* to be baptised, but he freely humiliated himself (what Paul refers to as *emptied* himself) and *chose* to be baptised so that he could identify with our total human experience. In the same way, the only human ever not to be deserving of the consequences of sin and the suffering it always causes, was Jesus; yet he *chose* to suffer and die on the Cross, to give us the gift of freedom from the dominance of sin in our lives, and its consequences. Mary Healy explains that ‘... Jesus’ ... baptism is an anticipation of his passion.’ Jesus later spoke of his death as a baptism in Mark 10:38 and ‘... acknowledges God’s just judgement on sin, while at the same time offering to God the response of perfect repentance on behalf of the people.’ (Healy)

It is important to note here that *for God*, none of this was necessary, but *for humanity* – it was vital – because history had shown that nothing other than this would grab people’s attention and get God’s message of love across to the peoples of the world. It was not for want of trying. For, while there were times when people did follow God’s ways, and they flourished, these were too short lived, and the world was once more plunged into the darkness of sin and its consequences. This is the recurring theme of the Old Testament and especially the Prophets. Remember, it was because

<sup>16</sup> God so *loved* the world that *he gave* his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> ‘Indeed, God did *not* send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

It is so vital that we get this right, especially if we want to spread the good news of the Gospel to others. Thinking people find it offensive that God’s wrath needed to be satisfied, and that, if Jesus did not take the punishment resulting from human sin upon himself, we would all go to hell. We too should find this offensive because it is, and it is also just wrong! Even the mere notion of God the Father, needing to punish his only Son is rightly referred to as ‘cosmic child abuse’. This might only gain a glimmer of credibility if God ‘condemned the world’, but John clearly says that his motive was *not* to condemn the world and so it has no standing in theology nor our message. What happened was God’s supreme act of love.

It was all motivated by God’s *love* that he was willing make a sacrifice of himself – just as most human parents would be willing to do the same for their children - God *gave* himself in the incarnate God, Jesus the ‘Son’, to save us. How many of us would die, in order for our children to live? I am sure most of us would because, we love them more than our life itself.

Look for the poetry in the prose to explain what happened. It is so important that we get this right, because our message must be good news for all the world, if we will ever be able to offer the gift of freedom and life to those who so desperately need it today.

As Jesus came up, out of the water, so the Holy Spirit came down; the heavens were not gently opened, they are ‘torn apart’. We encounter the deepest mystery here, and so I want to pause for a moment so that we can all benefit from the riches it offers. We know that Mark was a man of few words and none of them were used without having profound significance.

See how Mark makes no mention of anyone else experiencing what he is now explaining, other than Jesus himself; it is only Jesus who hears the voice, sees the heavens open and the Spirit descending – the rest just saw a dove! How then, did Mark get to know about this?

Some have thought that Mark just made this up to add drama to this event, but there is clearly no evidence for this. It makes more sense that Jesus spent a great deal of time explaining all important things to his disciples, especially those closest to him. It seems most likely then, that he did this, especially with Peter, who in turn did the same with John Mark. In the typical teaching style of the day, this would have continued when Mark discussed these things with others (just as we do when we meet for Bible studies) and was able to tease out the depth of meaning – and the way in which it all fulfilled the messianic prophecy of the Old Testament.

In Isaiah 64:1 and 2 the prophet prayed: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... to make your name known to your adversaries.” At the Baptism, this long uttered prayer was answered. This event also pointed forward to the Cross, when the same verb is used when, at the death of Jesus, the curtain in the temple was *torn* from top to bottom, thus ‘completing the reconciliation of heaven and earth that began at his baptism.’ (Healy)

The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove harkens back to the account of the creation in Genesis 1:2 in our reading today, and the hovering of the wind from God over the face of the waters. Here it shows God’s presence in bringing into being a ‘new’ creation in Jesus. In a sense then this can also be seen as the ‘ordination’ of the human Jesus, giving him, in his complete humanity – the great mystery - the assurance he would have needed, that the journey he was about to embark on was his Father’s will. Barclay suggests that this baptism was a moment of *decision*: For 30 years he had remained in Nazareth and lived an ordinary life and did an ordinary job. For some time, he must have been wandering when his ministry ought to begin. He probably looked for a sign. For him, the emergence of John the Baptist, could have been that sign. Barclay comments:

In every life there are moments of decision, which can be accepted or rejected. To accept them is to succeed in life; to reject them, or to shirk from them, is to fail. ... The wasted life, the frustrated life, the discontented life, and often the tragic life is the undecided life. The drifting life can never be the happy life.

Combined with the voice from the heavens, we see the whole Trinity in operation; the Father places his seal of approval on the Son, and this is confirmed by the Spirit. Healy points out that the message of the voice is full of biblical ‘echoes’ from the Psalms and Isaiah, which for the well-informed readers, would have provided delight and still further confirmation of the truth of the incarnation.

Barclay adds a few other thoughts that I find most helpful: It was also a moment of

*identification*: Jesus did not need to repent, but there had been a moment of decision also for the people who responded to John's message, and Jesus wanted to identify with them, not only for his own sake, but for their sake. It was a moment of *approval*: It is not an easy thing to leave the security of a job and family, so when one does this, one needs to be sure that it is the right thing to do. There are rare times when God speaks directly to people, and for most of us, God's voice is a 'far away echo'. In his Baptism, God spoke directly to Jesus in a personal experience – not as a demonstration to the crowd. Barclay writes: 'At his baptism Jesus submitted his decision to God and that decision was unmistakably approved.' It was a moment of *equipment*: the Holy Spirit descended upon him. There is symbolism here: the Spirit descended as a dove, with a lovely image of gentleness. In contrast to John's brash message and behaviour – which was appropriate and necessary at the time - from the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, he was gentle in his manner. This did not always seem to be the case as his message sometimes struck at the core of everything. Yet, as Barclay concluded: 'He will conquer, but the conquest will be the conquest of love.' And herein lies the excellent good news; that what was true for Jesus at this moment in history that Mark records, can also be true for us all. Just last week, we were reminded of this wonderful truth in John 1:12

<sup>12</sup>But to *all who received him, who believed* in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

This is again spoken of in 1 John 5:1: '*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God*, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. Healy explains:

Thus, these words [in Mark] are spoken to each of us as well: "You are my beloved son," "You are my beloved daughter." Only in accepting our identity as a beloved child of the Father is it possible for us too to embark courageously on the mission to which God has called us."

Jesus did not become the Son of God at his baptism by an act of adoption, he had always been since eternity been divine, and when on earth, by nature God incarnate. As Morna Hooker explains, the voice was a *declaration confirming* the true divine nature and identity of Jesus. Yet at the same time he was fully human – this is the greatest mystery of our faith. But because of who Jesus was and what he did for us, and because of whom Jesus still is today, *we are the ones who are adopted* as God's children, when we accept the gift that he offers. The Apostle Paul explains this in Romans 8:15-16:

<sup>15</sup>... *you have received a spirit of adoption*. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit *that we are children of God*.

This whole message is beautifully captured in Wesley's much loved hymn: *And can it be*, especially from verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> He left His Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace;  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race;  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me.

<sup>4</sup> Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free;  
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

<sup>5</sup> No condemnation now I dread;  
**Jesus, and all in Him is mine!**  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Mark therefore adds to our joy, because we know that this is also all true for us as modern disciples of Jesus. So, if we listen carefully today we can also hear God saying to each one of us, because *we have accepted the gift that Christ offers to all who would receive it:*

<sup>11</sup>... 'You are my child, a Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

God bless you all.

Amen.

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