

Epiphany & the Baptism

Yesterday we finished celebrating Christmas! Christmas is not one day – it is the twelve days from the Nativity to Epiphany. In that time, we have missed over more than a few important celebrations simply because we only have Church services on a Sunday and not during the week.

So we have missed out reflecting on:

- The feast of Stephen (second day of Christmas)
- St John the Evangelist (third day of Christmas)
- The holy innocents (who in Matthew's story Herod killed: fourth day of Christmas); and
- Circumcision and Holy Name day of Jesus (eighth day of Christmas)

While these are the New Testament saints and events recognised by all branches of Christianity, there is also the Catholic saint Thomas a Becket, and an important person in the years leading up to the reformation: John Wycliffe, who was the first to translate the Bible into English.

These are all important people and events, and well worth taking the time to reflect on their stories and what we could learn from them.

The celebration of Epiphany was yesterday, and today is the Baptism of Jesus. Instead of selecting one of these two important events, we will hear the stories of both.

Reflection 1

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season, which actually lasts for twelve days (hence the song). It commemorates the visit of the magi, wise people from the East. Quite a bit of tradition has built up about these characters. Think about your standard nativity play – there are always three to correspond with the three gifts brought to the infant. Also, the tradition that says they were kings is a merging with Psalm 72, which is set as a reading for Epiphany:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.

The word "magi" is often used in modern translations of this passage, and it really is simply a transliteration of the Greek, though yes, it is related to the English word "magic." The magi were the wise ones of their day. They studied the stars, but were astrologers more than astronomers. They were probably also sorcerers more than medical practitioners, but the roles certainly did overlap in their time and culture. In short, while today we would call their study pseudoscience, within the knowledge they had available, it was a serious seeking of learning and reflecting on how that learning impacted on daily life. However, there is nothing to suggest they were kings.

The magi are set up in comparison with Herod, who although was the king of the Jews, was not Jewish (although he wanted to be considered Jewish). He was a collaborator with Rome and ruthless in maintaining his power. While there is no

evidence for his massacre of the infants, this would have been considered a plausible story, particularly given he murdered several of his own sons.

So, in this Gospel, which was incidentally written to a Jewish-Christian community, we have foreign sages coming to seek the Christ-child. Their fields of learning, whilst acceptable to other Gentile communities, was largely not acceptable in Jewish thought, especially dabbling in astrology. Yet, through this learning the magi somehow heard a message from the Jewish God and responded. God's grace in using a means of communicating the magi would hear, precedes human action.

However, this star can only give them partial information. In order to find the Christ-child, they need the information given by those who are versed in the Jewish Scriptures. These are the very people whom Herod claimed to listen to in order to justify his power; yet Herod only wants to know where the Messiah is in order to destroy the child.

There is much more we could explore with this story, but I will stop here because already it raises important questions. Do we recognise God speaking in unexpected ways or the ways in which God connects to those who are not part of the church? Do we dismiss this because it is not within our Christian ways of relating? Do we respond to Scripture to build a hopeful future, or are we like Herod who uses it to plan destruction of innocent people? How can we truly listen to God rather than limiting the ways in which God can communicate with us?

Reflection 2

The Gospel reading for today (as opposed to yesterday) is a story we heard twice in Advent. We do not usually get this level of repetition in the lectionary, so the people who put the lectionary together must have thought it important. It is logical to have the reading here as today's celebration is the Baptism of Jesus. The Advent readings were selected to emphasise John as the one calling the way to Jesus.

In this lectionary selection, the story of Jesus' baptism is paired with a story from Acts (instead of an epistle reading). Listen to the two readings and as you listen, what do you notice differently about the Mark reading when you hear it in conjunction with the Acts reading? (Quick heads up, I will give a little time to respond to this question after the readings).

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

In these two stories we hear of two baptisms: the baptism of John and the baptism practiced by the followers of Jesus. It's interesting to note that Jesus was not recorded as having baptised anyone, and the baptism referred to, is "into the name of Jesus." These are different approaches to the understanding of baptism.

Commentators note that the understanding of baptism shown in Mark, as a means of forgiveness, may have been the popular understanding, but ancient texts assert it was hardly correct theology of the day. Rabbis taught the soul cannot be cleaned by an act of external washing. Instead, it was seen as symbolic of the inner cleansing or an appeal to God for forgiveness.

By putting these two readings next to each other, the compilers of the lectionary remind us of an important point – baptism is not about effecting forgiveness, which is John's baptism. The distinction is made in the Acts reading between John's baptism, popularly understood as about being for repentance, and receiving the Holy Spirit – a sign of connection to God. Interestingly in another Acts story the Gentiles first

receive the Holy Spirit, which prompts the Apostles to baptise them. This is a sign of God acting; a symbol of God's grace. The prophesying and speaking in tongues is a symbol of that connection to God, but for now I don't have time to dig deeper into it.

In this baptismal story we also see the relationship between God and Jesus, depicted in the heavens (that which was considered to separate humanity and God) being torn and the spirit appearing in the form of a dove. In many ways, the author of Mark uses this story to underpin his subsequent stories of the ministry of Jesus – much like the birth narratives function in other Gospels. Like Matthew's story of the Magi, there is an unexpected encounter with God that does not fit the preconceived ideas of what it looks like.

How is God's grace revealed to you? Are there times when you have been surprised by it? What does the practice of recognising God in these other parts of life mean for the way we live out our lives?