

Parish of Central Exeter
1st Sunday of Epiphany

10th January 2021

The Baptism of The Lord

Welcome everyone.



Our reflections this morning have been written by Sheila with the Intercessions by John Birch and provided by Caroline. Many thanks.

For most of us, Epiphany has passed – it was on January 6, and we have taken down all our Christmas decorations. But in church terms we remain in the season of Christmas and Epiphany until the Feast of Candlemas on February 2. Our opening prayers and hymn will still reflect the traditional Epiphany theme, and then the readings appointed for today take us to the beginning of Christ's ministry.

Call to Worship

Let us kneel in the darkness,
Until we see God's light emerge.
Let us wait with hope filled hearts,
As Christ's image grows within us and shows us life.
Let him speak to us and teach us love,
Until we open our hearts to be his home.

(by Christine Sine and posted on GodSpace.)

Gathering Hymn

We hear the Epiphany hymn: As with gladness, men of old.
Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB8rKNrlpDQ>

We say

O Star-flinging God,
whose light dances across eternity,
 dazzle us into your presence
 this new year.
Open our hearts to the mystery of your love.

Awaken us to your presence,
 knit to the ordinary.
Reveal to us what is possible, but not yet present. *(From longer piece by Glenn Mitchell)*

Confession

We thank you God that you know what it is to be human
Fragile and vulnerable,
searching for ways to stay alive in dangerous and complicated times
We thank you that you know the struggles and temptations
of living in darkness.
And we thank you that you give light to the world.

We confess that sometimes it's easier to stay in the shadows,
where things can stay hidden,
where people can't see our cracks and flaws.

**Cast your light on our darkness
and forgive us, God of love.**

We confess that we have at times brought darkness
into the world by our anger, our selfishness, our violence.

**Cast your light on our darkness
and forgive us, God of love.**

We confess that we are sometimes sceptical of light
and find it easier to trust its absence.

**Cast your light on our darkness
and forgive us, God of love.**

And in this silence,
bring the confessions that are on your heart and mind
into the light of God's love

[silence]

We know in faith that God restores and renews,
and that our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

(by Cheryl Lawrie and posted on hold this space.)

Psalm

The psalm appointed for today is Psalm 29. (New Revised Standard Version)

- ¹ Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendour.
- ³ The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.



- ⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'
- ¹⁰ The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.
- ¹¹ May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!



Collect for the first Sunday of Epiphany.

Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus
revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Worship song

'A mighty fortress is our God'. This is Martin Luther's great hymn and echoes the theme of the power of God as seen in the Psalm. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XUYZoguhEQ>

New Testament Readings

Mark 1:9-11 The Baptism of Jesus

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

John 1:29-34 The Lamb of God

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

Reflection

In the season of Epiphany, we move straight from the wise men visiting to the infant Jesus to the baptism of the adult Jesus. Unlike the stories surrounding Jesus's birth which occur only in Matthew and Luke (and differ completely), the baptism comes in each gospel, but the context and wording are different.

In Mark we meet the adult Jesus from Nazareth who comes with others to be baptized by John in the Jordan. There is no background given on Jesus's life, but rather short sentences and immediacy of action. Jesus goes down into the water and rises to receive the Holy Spirit and word of assurance of his identity before being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to test his vocation (v12). We are not given any indication how Jesus came to this point; in a way this is an example of adult conversion.

By contrast Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with the stories we know well from our Christmas readings. These give us a background for Jesus, which suggest, particularly with Luke's account of the 12 year-old Jesus in the temple, that Jesus had a growing awareness of his identity and role, which culminated in the affirmation of the baptism story.

Both gospels, together with Mark, record a voice from heaven recognizing Jesus as 'the beloved Son': words repeated in all three gospels in their accounts of the transfiguration, and which I will return to shortly. I want to suggest that the image of Jesus approaching his baptism portrayed in Matthew and Luke could represent the situation of those brought up in the Christian faith who subsequently make an adult commitment.

The introduction to John's gospel is different again, starting with links to creation in John 1:1 and finishing with the first sign in John 2:11. We read about John the Baptist in Advent and heard the Christmas gospel from 1:1-14, while the next two weeks' readings will lead up to 2:11. Today we have the first indication of time passing in the phrase 'the next day', and there are more of these indications in the coming sections as the gospel writer introduces Jesus.

Firstly, through the witness of John the baptiser, who here does not baptise Jesus so much as declare what he saw in a vision. It is all God's action in sending the Spirit onto Jesus, and in enabling John to recognise and understand what this means, so that John declares 'that this is the Son of God'. This is a reminder to us all that whichever way we come to faith, and

continue in faith, it is through God's grace. We receive the Holy Spirit, which is God's gift to sustain us.

Returning to Mark's brief account, I remember being told that the word translated as 'torn' to describe the opening of the heavens for the descent of the Spirit, is used only once more in the gospel - near the end, with 'the curtain of the temple torn in two from top to bottom' (Mark 15:38). This leads to the third time in the gospel where Jesus is described as Son of God, and here it is from the mouth of the centurion (v39).

The words at the baptism and transfiguration coming from heaven are both confirmation to Jesus of his identity and role and are a witness, particularly at the transfiguration, of this identity to others. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way, but he enables all of us to live as God's beloved children. This offer is open to all as John wrote in 1:12 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God.'

Do we live as brothers and sisters of the adult Jesus, in the power of God's Spirit and willing to continue to grow and learn and serve?

I conclude with a prayer I found in the 'shine on, star of Bethlehem' anthology of readings edited by Geoffrey Duncan © 2001, 2004.

Our Common Baptism

Creator Spirit

who in the beginning hovered over the waters

and at Jesus's baptism descended in the form of a dove;

who at Pentecost was poured out under the signs of wind and fire –
come to us;

open our hearts and minds

for the life-giving word

in the covenant of baptism,

so that we may listen

and be renewed by your power.

Sinfonia Occumenica, Germany

Thanksgiving

Lord of Hope

we give You thanks for a new year and a new start.

We arise today to the knowledge that Your Son,

our Lord, goes before us;

to the hope that through His presence

all people will be transformed;

to the promise of salvation for all.

For this and more we thank You.

(From Church of Scotland website)

Intercessions

In the season of Epiphany we remember the long journey which brought the Magi, seeking a king and finding a babe who they recognised as God made manifest. And so we pray ...

For those who seek a Saviour,
We lead them to the stable,
To the one who was born
To bring Freedom,
Forgiveness,
Liberty.

For those who seek Assurance,
We lead them to the Light,
To the one who opens eyes
To understanding
God's Word
Truth.

For those who seek Forgiveness,
We lead them to the Grace
Beyond comprehension,
To wholeness
Healing
Peace.

The Magi brought gifts to honour His kingship, His holiness and foreshadow his sacrifice made for us all

And so now we pray for the Church throughout the world ...

You have gifted the Church
Through the goodness of your Grace
To be your hands and do your work.
To be your voice and share your words.
To bring healing to a fallen world
To make broken lives whole.

You have gifted your people
With the blessing of your Spirit,
The power to transform lives
And make all things new.

Now may our hearts receive
Our mouths proclaim.
Our hands prepare for service
That the love that we have known



Might overflow the lives we live
And pour into the hearts of others.
That all might receive your Grace
Your renewing Spirit and your love.

And as we journey on we pray for ourselves that we may use your gifts to us
For love that offers refreshment
To all who drink of it.
Light to all who walk in it,
Strength to all who hope in it,
Healing to all who have need of it,
Wholeness to all who live in it.

This is the God we serve,
The God we worship,
The God we proclaim
This day and all days
With our words and our lives.

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to a setting of Agnus Dei – Behold the Lamb of God from the Mass of St James.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOSG6tvuT1w>



Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Lord of all time and eternity,
you opened the heavens and revealed yourself as Father
in the baptism of Jesus your beloved Son:
by the power of your Spirit
complete the heavenly work of our rebirth
through the waters of the new creation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission & Benediction

Take us from where we are, to where you want us to be;
make us not merely guardians of a heritage,
but living signs of your coming Kingdom;
fire us with passion for justice and peace between all people;
fill us with that faith, hope and love which embody the Gospel;
and through the power of the Holy Spirit make us one.

(From the World Council of Churches website)

Blessing

Go in peace; love and care for one another in the name of Christ;
and may the Spirit of God which filled John and Jesus,
fill your hearts, souls and minds;
may the power of God which upheld them,
strengthen you for each day;
and may the love of God which directed their every action
be your guiding light and your shining star,
both now and forevermore. **Amen**

(by Rev. Richard J. Fairchild, and posted on his Kir-shalom website.)

Closing Music

Brightest and best of the suns of the morning. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5ACL94B4rM>



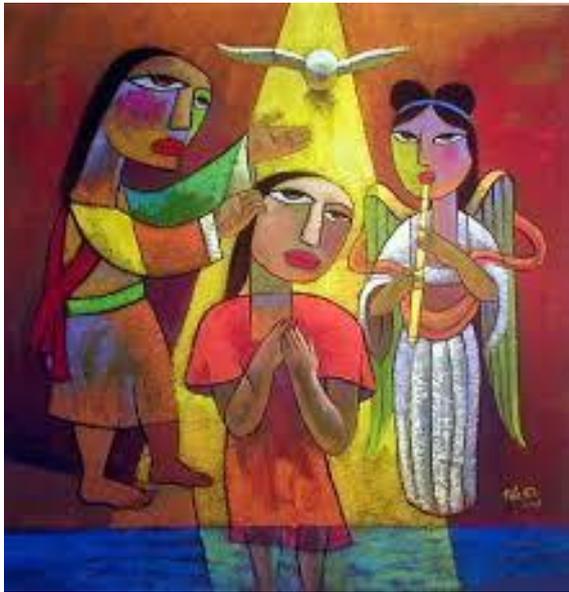
Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

The Baptism of Christ by Malcolm Guite (in Sounding the Seasons)

Beginning here we glimpse the Three-in-one;
The river runs, the clouds are torn apart,
The Father speaks, the Spirit and the Son
Reveal to us the single loving heart
That beats behind the being of all things
And calls and keeps and kindles us to light.
The dove descends, the spirit soars and sings
'You are beloved, you are my delight!'

In that quick light and life, as water spills
And streams around the Man like quickening rain,
The voice that made the universe reveals
The God in Man who makes it new again.
He calls us too, to step into that river
To die and rise and live and love forever.



The Baptism of Christ by He Qi, who trained in China, and is currently resident in California.

Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

1st Sunday of Epiphany
10th January 2021

**Manifestation: the making obvious
that something is happening.**

Preparation

Father God,
We rest in you.

Jesus the Son,
We rest in you.

Holy Spirit,
We rest in you.

Silence

Introduction

We tend to think of Epiphany as the time when the Magi visit the infant Jesus with their gifts: Christ being made manifest (which is what Epiphany means) to the Gentiles. However for the early (Eastern) church the principal manifestation of Jesus was through his baptism by John in the Jordan. The emphasis was changed as the Western church became more dominant in European thinking. So we can legitimately hold together the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus in our night prayer.

We shall do so through two paintings and a poem. Take time to reflect over what is being made manifest to you.

Prayer for Epiphany

Radiant Morning Star,
you are both guidance and mystery,
Visit our rest with disturbing dreams,
and our journeys with strange companions.

Grace us with the hospitality
to open our hearts and homes
to visitors filled with unfamiliar wisdom
bearing profound and unusual gifts. Amen.

(written by Kris, and posted on RevGalBlogPals website.)



*If you are able to do so, you might wish
to light a candle near a window.*

The worship of the Magi by Andrea Mantegna c1500 John Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



This is not a detail from a larger picture. Normally in paintings of the adoration of the Magi we see the whole scene. No so here. There is no background context, instead we are confronted intimately by the key participants and the gifts. But what is the focus of everyone's attention in the scene?

It's all in the eyes! The magi are offering their gifts but they gaze up and off into the distance. So it seems we are being introduced not to the event itself, but the inmost thoughts of those involved. The artist is inviting us to wonder what is on their minds. Perhaps they're asking of the star they followed: Is this really the one to whom you've led us? Are we doing the right thing?

Joseph stands apart, keeping a wary eye on these wealthy visitors. What is on his thoughts? Perhaps something like: How did they get here with such extravagant gifts? What do these strangers really want? Will there be a price to pay for all this?

Not surprisingly, Mary keeps her eye on her child. You might think she would hold on to him tightly, her precious baby, but instead she appears to be holding him out, offering the child. Is the artist suggesting she might see in this unexpected visit the twists and turns her Son's

life will take? Is she already aware that she will, in the end, need to give him away to all who come looking for him?

Jesus' eyes do not seem focused on the gifts. Is this suggesting what he really wants from us does not come from a treasure chest but only from our hearts.

So where do we see certainty and where do we see doubt? And where do we find ourselves in all this?

(The inspiration for this came from Concord Pastor blog)

Worship song

We now hear 'Be thou my vision' sung by St George's College Choir.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gbHxa0p-4c>

Wise Women Also Came

I hope the painting we have just been sharing has helped us to understand the challenges of Epiphany. Someone who has been inspired by Epiphany is the American artist and writer Jan Richardson, who is an ordained Methodist minister. She has been especially interested in an Irish custom prevalent in Co. Cork and Co. Kerry of the 'Women's Christmas' which is celebrated on the feast of Epiphany when women would leave the house and domestic responsibilities to celebrate the day together. In this poem she considers how it was not just wise men who visited the infant Jesus.

Wise women also came.
The fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king.
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.
They came in quiet,

spreading no rumours,
sparking no fears
to lead
to innocents' slaughter,
to their sister Rachel's
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labour's washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labour,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.

Prayer

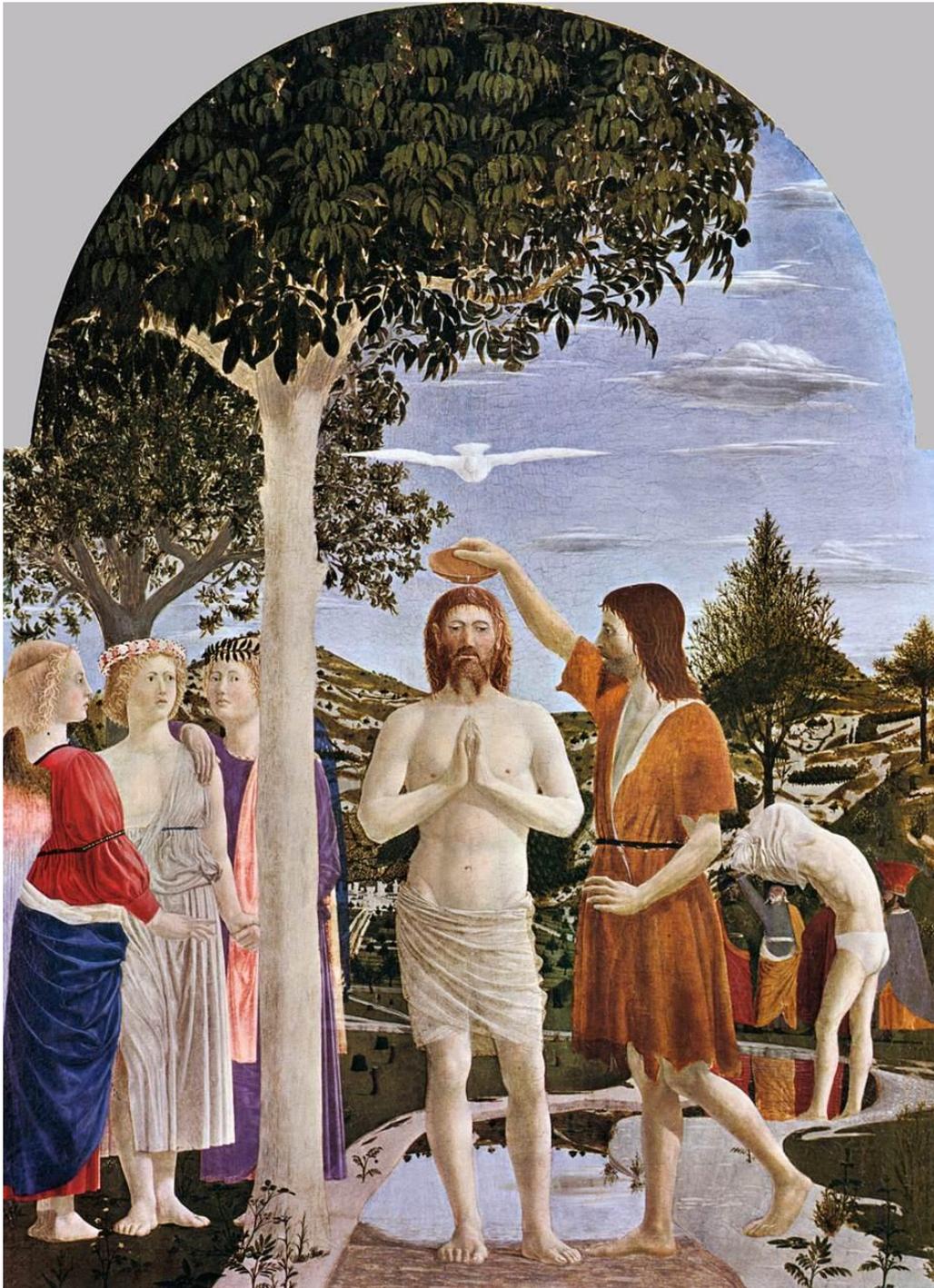
Lord we would bring you our gifts, whatever they may be, in the hope that in some way you can use them to help further your kingdom here on Earth.

Worship song

'Spirit of God, Unseen as the Wind.' This is from BBC Songs of Praise. Click on the symbol on left of screen to start.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05cpk1w>

Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca 1448-50 National Gallery, London



The lighting effect in the painting is quite extraordinary. It is from the top down creating very limited shadows, and giving a three-dimensional effect to the figures.

Jesus stands totally still, dressed as he will be later at his crucifixion, he is accepting his vocation now and in the future.

The three figures on the left as you can tell from their barely noticeable wings, are angels, but they are looking apprehensive – perhaps wondering about the enormity of the decision being made.

The figure on the right has apparently decided to follow Jesus and is getting ready to be baptised.

The central line of the picture goes directly upward through Jesus, the baptismal water, the dove representing the Holy Spirit to God the Father, out of sight here, but from whom the light mentioned at the beginning is emanating.

We pray

Loving Father,
you anointed Jesus at his baptism
with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your dear Son.
Thank you for making us your children
by water and the Spirit.
Keep us faithful to you
throughout our lives.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.

(Lutheran Church of Australia)

Commission and Blessing

Go now as a light to the nations.
Honour the Lord;
preach what you know of the risen Christ,
and fulfil all righteousness.

And may God strengthen you and bless you with peace;
May Christ Jesus bring forth justice for you and among you;
And may the Holy Spirit alight on you
and affirm you as God's beloved ones.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Closing music

O Love that will not let me go. Sung here as a duet. Words are on the screen.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJOUtCModPI>

Thanks to everyone who has participated. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.