

Epiphany – Manifestation – Revelation – Showing!

Jesus' Baptism – central theme of Epiphany Festival in the Eastern Church. Why? His total identification with the human condition.

Looking upon a newborn baby in all his helplessness at Christmas. We understand his solidarity with his own people in the covenant of circumcision when he was eight days old. But it is in his standing alongside sinful humanity (Phil 2:7-8) that we look upon his nakedness as he enters the waters of baptism. He, the sinless one, stood with sinners whom he had come to save.

Gospel writers present this to us as both inaugurating his own ministry, receiving affirmation of his mission from his heavenly Father by anticipating his death and resurrection in the drowning (going under) in the waters and the rising out from them. Here is a new birth, not just a washing away of the past but a birth in the Spirit. It is God who has saved and redeemed.

Subsequent writers in the early centuries of our faith were not slow to pick up the symbolic allusions of all this from the Hebrew Scriptures. As Noah was called upon by God to save creation from the Flood, so Christ carries God's people and the created world through the waters

of drowning and destruction. As Moses led the children of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea and God saved them from the pursuing enemy, so Christ in his own person takes on the sin of the world and drowns it in the waters of baptism. As Joshua led the people of Israel across the river Jordan in to the promised land, so Jesus (the name is the same) through baptism leads his followers in to the promised land of the Kingdom of God.

So the baptism of Jesus thus came to be seen as the sign of the new creation under which his followers would enter his kingdom, share his mission, and receive the enlightenment of the Spirit. One early writer (Gregory of Nyssa) even went so far as to see in Christ an Atlas figure – “As he emerges with the water which runs off his body he elevates the whole world”. Christ carries the world on his shoulders – the cross and eventually to resurrection. No wonder then that this day of Baptism has come to be seen as so important – it anticipates the whole of Christ’s ministry and mission: the Father’s voice from heaven affirming Jesus in his vocation; the anticipation of his suffering, death and resurrection in this extraordinary rite of baptism; the descent of the Spirit on him as it would come upon his new body, the Church, at Pentecost.

As you may know, I have been acting as the Commissary Bishop for Portsmouth Diocese in their vacancy and so have had opportunity to preside at acts of worship in Portsmouth Cathedral. *(Here describe the architecture and the place of the font – a sarcophagus/coffin shape*

*under the arch that forms a tunnel like entrance from the nave to the chancel).* It is a powerful reminder of our own mortality but also of our dying and rising with Christ in Baptism.

We need to recall our own baptism/confirmation. Do you know and remember the dates of your Baptism and Confirmation? Why not come to Mass on that anniversary each year to renew your personal commitment to Christ? Whenever it was, as a baby, child or adult, we need to recall it so that we live out its implications more fully: adopted as God's child, following Christ in the power of the Spirit, dying and rising with Christ into his Kingdom. Not a distant past event. It was once for all, but is an ever-present reality as God's continuing grace seeks to transform us to be like Christ, so that we may see all people as potential sons and daughters of God.

Today we are remembering the glory of God in the mere humanity of the naked Christ going down into the Jordan. Tomorrow let us see the glory of God in the mere humanity of every man, woman and child and in seeing that glory, commit ourselves to remember our commissioning for service and ministry that was and is our Baptism, a commission to bring more people to know God in Christ and thus find their own lives enriched and transformed by God's love.