

Sermon for Epiphany 1 - the Baptism of Christ (B) – 11.01.15
St James' Church, Cambridge – The Revd Deborah Ford



“[Jesus...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.’”

(Mark 1:9-11)

- Last Sunday we celebrated Epiphany: God making himself known and becoming fully human in the person of Jesus Christ – a light reaching out and ‘dawning’ on the whole world – opening our eyes to the incredible mystery of the love and life of God. As John puts it: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. (John 1:18)
- It’s something that’s even been taken up into everyday language, isn’t it? People refer to ‘epiphany moments’ – moments where we have a deep, new and particularly significant insight about something/someone. For many of us, we’d probably see them as somehow ‘God’ –God breaking in and opening us to something new and ‘beyond’ our human understanding. ‘God moments,’ are what a friend of mine calls them: moments of Divine revelation.
- You may be able to think of some of those moments in your life.... They’re incredibly precious, aren’t they?
- The Feast of Epiphany originated in the Eastern churches right back in the fourth century and included a celebration of Jesus’ birth, the visit of the Magi (wise men) and all that happened in his childhood – up to (and including) his

baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist... And sometimes, his first miracle (turning water into wine at the wedding reception in Cana), too.

- And although it the Eastern Church eventually decided to recognise December 25th as an occasion to celebrate Jesus' birth separately, it *still* celebrates Jesus' baptism and the visit of the Magi *together* at Epiphany (with the emphasis on the baptism, much more than the Magi). Whereas for many centuries, churches in the West have separated out the different parts of the story and celebrated them on *separate* occasions.
- Now, in the calendar of the Church of England at least, Epiphany is recognised as a whole '*season*' – and the celebration of the anticipation and fulfilment of the Incarnation extended until Candlemas (February 2nd)– when Jesus is presented in the Temple and Mary takes part in the ritual of purification for women 40 days after giving birth.
- So just in case you thought Christmas was over and done with for another year (and I notice the shops are already promoting Crème eggs) – it's not! Hence all our Christmas decorations still being up in church.
- I must say, I find it quite a confusing time, jumping back and forth between Jesus as a baby, with loads of visitors, then suddenly grown up and being baptised at the beginning of his chapter of 'public' ministry... and then back to being an infant again, being brought for circumcision and naming in the Temple.
- But I suppose if we think in terms of 'Epiphany moments' – they all *are* in different ways, aren't they? Whether it's Mary hearing the voice of God through angel Gabriel, or John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb when she meets Mary, her expectant cousin, or the shepherds recognising something in the angel's "To you this day a Saviour is born..." or the Magi recognising something in the star and following it until it leads them to the place where they are 'overwhelmed with joy' ... Or Simeon or Anna, after all their faithful years of praying, hoping and waiting in the temple. And they certainly don't stop there... Moments of epiphany go on and on happening.
- But whereas 'light' is often the theme associated with Epiphany, the emphasis in all the readings today is on the *voice* of God.
- Right at the beginning of Genesis, God *speaks* creation into being, doesn't he? Into the chaos of darkness and disorder, God *says*, "**Let there be light...**"- God *calls* light into being and it *is* – and it is *good*. In one of his early Narnia books, C.S. Lewis describes God's voice as '*singing*' creation into being: it's a gentle beckoning – never imposing itself or forcing anything.

- Compare that with the opening of John's gospel:
“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being with him was live and the light was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.” (John 1: 1-5)
- In today's psalm it's: **“The voice of the Lord is over the waters... the voice of the Lord is powerful... full of majesty. The voice of the Lord is a *glorious voice*... The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars... makes Lebanon skip like a calf... The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire... causes the oaks to whirl... The voice of the Lord *shakes* the wilderness... strips the forests bare... in his temple all cry, ‘*Glory*’”** (Ps 29)
- In Acts, some of the disciples in Ephesus are intrigued when they discover that baptism in the name of Jesus is different to the baptism of repentance they've received from John the Baptist. And when they receive baptism into *Christ*, they're filled with the Holy Spirit. The sign of this is **“they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”** (Acts 19:6). Their voices are taken up in a new and an as-yet- very *strange* God-given language.
- Then the voice in Mark, when is his Father's voice speaking over the waters of Jesus' baptism, saying **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”** (1:11) It's the only time we hear God's voice directly in the synoptics - apart from the Transfiguration, when we're reminded again **“This is my Son, the beloved: *listen to him!*”** (Mark 9:7)
- Baptism in the name of Jesus (which for us today includes repentance as a *preparation* for being baptised in the Holy Spirit) means that we're brought into a new language with which to understand and make sense of things. The Holy Spirit in us opens us up and reveals God's voice (in us and in the world) more and more clearly: so we can enter into the language and intimate relationship of love between the Father and Son... To discover what it means to be *children* of God.
- From the moment we're baptised, that's what the Spirit is doing... drawing us deeper into the life and resurrection of Jesus. Opening us up more and more fully to God's voice of blessing, affirmation and peace.
- God's Spirit in us is a *powerful thing*: it means that we're sealed with a love that's stronger than death, a passion that's as fierce as the grave, a love raging with a flame that no waters can quench. I'm not sure the image of the dove

quite captures it for me- but of course it's the dove who brought the olive branch after the waters of the flood subsided in the Noah story. And I guess it could be a very *large* dove!

- When I'm looking at texts or stories in the Bible, I often 'Google' images or pictures of them to help me to understand or see them in new ways... and when I looked at various images of Jesus' baptism for today, I was struck by two in particular:
- The first is a modern painting, where the Holy Spirit is simply pouring down on Jesus – a bit like a massive waterfall, to the point where he can only just stand because of its force and energy. He's standing sort of like this – bent over by it's force – so it has a hint of the crucifixion about it, too.
- The second is by one of Rembrandt's disciples. It's a fairly dim, dusky brown scene, with the outlines of various hills and figures looking down from above the River Jordan, yet right in the middle, below, where Jesus is being baptised by John, there is an outpouring of light – *pumping* life and energy into Jesus so that he is simply *radiant*.
- I've left a copy of them at the back near the door if you want to have a look.
- They give a real sense of the gentleness and yet powerfulness of the Holy Spirit... the sense that however chaotic or dark things get - even if the whole world is in chaos – and often it seems as if the world is (certainly huge parts of it are)... God's voice is there in the midst calling us into *new* order and peace:

“The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever. May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!” (Ps 29: 10)

- But we need to have ears to *hear*...
- I remember when our first baby was born. Like many first labours, it was quite along and difficult one and after a difficult labour, although I was thrilled to bits when she was finally born, I was also pretty done in and suddenly very unsure about all the responsibilities of motherhood: even if I'd longed for it. I was very grateful when one of the midwives offered to take her to the nursery for the night. But what I couldn't quite get my head round was that, however exhausted and desperate I might be to sleep and recover, they would come and wake me when she needed a feed! No longer did my needs come first... it was quite an awakening. (Although I now realise that it was a sheer luxury - nowadays most Mums wouldn't be able to stay for more than a few hours post-delivery).

- The other thing that worried me a lot was “How will I be able to tell which one was mine?” I know they all have ID bracelets (baby X or Y), but that didn’t seem quite good enough... and anyway, what if they’d made a mistake?! I didn’t know her well enough yet to be able to distinguish her voice from any other baby’s... But even if/when I *did* manage to, how on earth was I going to know whether it was a ‘tired’ or ‘hungry’ or ‘wet’ or ‘cold’ cry?
- I’m relieved to say I learnt... I learnt to ‘attune’ to a whole range of her communications with me: and it was a delight: but it took patience and time and being *very* attentive to her.
- Just think of all the tones of voice and all the moods and ways in which we speak... through words and beyond words...
- God speaks to us in all of those, God who has been a little baby himself ...
- And thankfully God is much better at it than we are (or I was): the one who’s known us and who called us before we were even *formed* in our mothers’ wombs...who says “each of the hairs on your head are counted...”, the Shepherd who knows each of his sheep by name... *We’re* the ones who need to give it time and energy if we really want to discover the fullness of Gods’ love and life for us and for the world. That’s the invitation to us every day “*Come...* Let me hear *your* voice: your deepest hopes and fears... Let me speak into them... *Listen* to me....”
- God’s voice isn’t repeating the same thing over and over again... it’s constantly speaking afresh to us - every single day and every single night.
- And it’s not just about listening and hearing... As the Spirit draws us into God’s voice, we’re united *with* his voice.... Our God-given voices come into being in a new way: ‘deep calls to deep’ in us (Ps 42) to fulfil *God’s* purposes: to speak the Word of God into all the things that distort and oppose and undermine the truth. We’re called to speak words of comfort, blessing, affirmation, hope, peace... *In and through the Spirit of Jesus himself*: the Comforter and Guide, who gently yet powerfully leads us into the fullness of life.
- It’s quite a responsibility, isn’t it? But what an awesome privilege... to be invited to take part in the re-creative process of God’s Word, helping others to hear and recognise God’s glorious voice and love in them and in the world, so that we can join in with the song of all creation:

**“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the honour due to his name....” (Ps 29:1-3)**

Amen.