

First Sunday After Epiphany

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I start with wishing everyone a Happy New Year. It is almost impossible to imagine a world without lockdown; who would have thought, this time last year, that we would be living in such critically uncertain times, but we have so much to be thankful for.

So today we rejoice as we celebrate the First Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord: his manifestation, his showing forth, or shining forth; the light which shines in the darkness, the light which all this world's darkness can never overcome. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6) Many events in the Gospels are particularly associated with the Epiphany. First, of course, there is the coming of the star-led wise men from the East, who brought their gifts of gold, and incense, and myrrh, acknowledging the infant Jesus as King, as God, and as sacrifice. Then the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, with the visible descent of the Spirit, and the declaration of his divine sonship, Praise God.

However, for many of us, this New Year comes with fear, doubts, hopes and expectations. We are either sceptical or rejoicing at the rolling out of the Vaccines for COVID-19, or anxious about the events that will follow Brexit, and the expectations of maybe a holiday, or even just the freedom of meeting with family and friends. We are all full of expectations for ourselves and the world around us. The preparation for Christmas the past year has exhausted us (it came with sudden changes and so many restrictions that made it both as tedious as it was relieving), the holiday has given us a reason for a fresh start, as we fill in our calendars for the coming year and make lists of projects and plans not achieved last year which we feel are long overdue. This will be the year that we get the vaccines, restart and reshape our businesses, get a new job or be less anxious about the pandemic state of the world, therefore could be able to read a book or two. We are ready for big changes, and big answers.

The gospel stories that we heard over Christmas foreshadowed the sense of expectation for the new year, with angels heralding the births of the two miraculous babies, John the-Baptist and his cousin Jesus Christ, silencing John the Baptist's father, reassuring Jesus's mother, and guiding shepherds to a lowly manger. Certainly, we are inclined to think, the good news will continue to inspire the same sense of awe, excitement, and wonder as we enter the new year.

Looking at today's Bible reading, we recognise the importance of the Baptism of our Lord, and as God, through His Spirit, proclaims to Jesus, "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" (Luke 3:22) But today's Bible reading calls us to change tack, to listen carefully, to pay attention to the details as much as the big picture. As I said a moment ago, we know now that Jesus's baptism was very significant. But if we look at it as if we had been there when it happened, we will picture the event differently.

First, it is possible that none, other than John the Baptist and Jesus himself, noticed that Jesus was being baptised. In those days, John the Baptist was the one in the eyes of the public and religious leaders, he attracted crowds in the wilderness for a baptism of repentance, urging those who were looking for salvation from the corrupt and oppressive rulers of their day to look first at themselves: to repent of their own sins, be charitable and share with those who had none, to desist from false accusation, violence, extortion and lack of contentment. (Luke 3:11-14) That may be an inspirational message for the New Year, but it did not come from Jesus. Nothing much was known about Jesus before he turned 30, aside from the revelational experience his parents had in the Temple with Simeon and Anna when they came for Purification and presentation for consecration to the Lord as the first-born son, and the time he was a curious 12-year-old on a visit to the Jerusalem temple with his parents; was left behind, later found and joined the Passover crowd in the wilderness. Aside from these he was just one among many people who were baptised by his cousin John, which seemed not to have made much impression on anyone else at the time.

What happened when Jesus prayed after his baptism is the remarkable thing. Verse 21 says, “When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and a voice came from heaven and said, *'You are my Son, whom I love: with you I am well pleased.'*” But...despite how we might imagine the voice of God – like the rushing sound of the rivers of water, or booming impossible to miss, unbelievably loud – there is absolutely no indication that anyone other than Jesus heard a sound (we are not told). Nevertheless, it was enough. It was enough to carry Jesus into the wilderness, enough to sustain him in the face of the Devil’s temptations, enough to launch the ministry that is the reason that we are today called Christians. And it set the pattern for the way that God and Jesus communicated, not through big happenings or spectacles, but off the main stage, through prayer and listening.

In other words, this morning’s Bible passage teaches us that the clearest manifestations of God’s power and presence often come to us not in grand gestures or bold accomplishments or anything that we control. Rather, our reading from the gospel of Luke teaches that the clearest manifestations of God’s power and presence often come to us when we pause and pray and pay attention. No one else may have heard God’s proclamation that Jesus was his Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased, but – through prayer – Jesus did.

It is a pattern that Jesus displayed throughout Luke’s gospel: that prayer is the precursor to big actions and big decisions. As word about Jesus first through John the Baptist and others, spread far and wide, and the stakes of his ministry grew, Luke 5:16 tells us that “he would withdraw to lonely places and pray.” Again, before he chose his disciples, he prayed (Luke 6:12). Before he submitted to those who would kill him, he prayed. Before he breathed his last breath, he prayed.

The example was not lost on Jesus’s disciples, who asked him to teach them to pray. He not only taught them what we now call the Lord’s Prayer, but he taught them to pray persistently, expectantly, and with enough humility to recognise that we may not know the

answer even when we think we do, and God knows our request even before we ask. (Matthew 6:9-13)

We are warned against “running before we are sent.” In other words, for example, however ambitious, terrifying, exciting, daunting or inspiring our New Year’s aspirations may seem, we should take the time to discern prayerfully where God may be calling.

Particularly in this dark, grey time of the year in the current uncertain ever changing world, remember that much is taking place beyond what we can easily see and hear. Somewhere, we can hear it if we are listening, God is calling us “*Beloved*” and calling us to something he has planned for us.

It is as true for our Nation, the Church as a community, as it is for us as individuals. We ended 2020 on a wave of uncertainty, changes and expected hope for more certainty in this new year, we also begin 2021 on a raft of high expectations. We have much to look forward to. Let us remember to do so through prayers and discernment by listening for God’s voice and trusting and remembering to pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

To God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be glory and praise now, and forever, Amen.