

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021
The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

Please use this material with the order of service for
Virtual Worship for Christmas & Epiphany 2020-2021

Collects for The Baptism of Christ

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.

(or)

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognize him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Readings

Genesis 1: 1-5

Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

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.'

Reflection

Genesis 1.1-5

Mark 1.4-11

'My Son, the Beloved'

Five weeks ago, on 6th December, if you were at the Eucharist in church, or following our virtual service at home, you will have heard (or read) part of the same Gospel passage we heard today. Why is our lectionary— our course of readings – repeating itself so quickly?

The story is about John the Baptist, an uncouth yet arresting man, who 'appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside, and all the people of Jerusalem, were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.' (Mark 1.4.5) But he preached not himself, but one who was coming, who would, John said, 'baptize...with the Holy Spirit' (v.8). This one, said John, would be so great that he – John – would not be worthy even to take a

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

disciple's accustomed role of bending down to untie the thong of the Master's sandal (v.7)

The reading five weeks ago ended at that point. It had looked back into the past, to the prophets, and told us who John was - that he was a divinely intended messenger; 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness', as had been foretold in the book of Isaiah. Now, today's version of the same story moves forward to reveal the identity of the greater one who was coming-- Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee – not at all who might have been expected. An artisan, from a small place up north, someone blending into the crowds as they all surged forward to be baptised.

If the author of the Gospel had looked to the past to tell us who John was, he now asks us to look to the future – into events as they unfold – to see who Jesus is.

And what begins to unfold is immediate – a vision; heaven torn open, God's Holy Spirit made visible in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declaring 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (v.11).

Mark's Gospel, like Matthew's, implies that this vision was given to Jesus alone; in Luke and John's Gospel we are led to believe that John the Baptist witnessed it, too. Later on, in Jesus' ministry there was a similar event – a similar revelation – on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured before his disciples' eyes, and that time both the vision and the voice from heaven were clearly experienced by the disciples as well, we assume, by Jesus. The words then were 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!' (Mark 9.7)

The common factor, on both occasions, is the phrase, 'My Son, the Beloved'. Let's dwell on those words in three ways.

Firstly, let's think of them as a profound revelation of Jesus' being – a true Epiphany of his nature. Never before had anyone trodden the earth who was God's Son in the sense that he was (and is). Israel's kings had been addressed as those whom God had made his sons – you can see it in some of the psalms. In a similar way, we rejoice to be children

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

of God by adoption and grace. But Jesus is revealed at his Baptism as God's Son in a unique sense – one with the Father, completely divine in nature, yet also fully human. It's a mind-blowing thought – like the doctrine that there is one God in three persons; we can't with human logic get our heads round it. And yet we're asked to embrace it with our hearts in faith. God's Son on earth and living our life: Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, let's get back to those words from heaven, 'My Son, the Beloved', and think of them in a second way. Whether or not anybody other than Jesus heard them when he came up out of the water after his Baptism, we can be sure that for him, as a human being, they must have had great psychological effect.

Can you remember either of your parents ever telling you in a more than casual way that they loved you, and were proud of you? I do hope you can. Too many of us go through life uncertain of ourselves, of our value or our worth. Have you heard that phrase 'Impostor Syndrome'? It describes the feeling so many people harbour that one day they will be found out as 'not good enough' – not good enough for the job they've got, the love they're offered, the respect people show them. It's a real and disabling temptation. Jesus – a true human being, remember – could have been tempted by that nagging feeling as he entered into his ministry of authority, wonder and teaching; but at key moments like his Baptism (just before he was tested severely in the wilderness) , and at the Transfiguration,(when he was setting his face to go to Jerusalem to do his greatest work of all) he was given this ultimate assurance: 'You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.' The assurance of the Father's love and approval gave him, we must imagine, the inner strengthening his human nature needed to walk firmly on the path set before him.

So, thirdly, when we ponder those words, 'My Son, the beloved...'we may reflect how much we need to hear them, too. We are not the unique Son of God, of course, nor are we without sins and flaws. Speaking for myself, I could mention plenty! And it's those very sins and flaws which may make it difficult for each of us privately to believe

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

that God really does love us – not to mention whatever natural lack of self-confidence we have grown up with. But none of this expunges the truth that each of us is a child of God by adoption and grace - a beloved child, signified in our baptism. Although we may not be able to remember that event (though some lucky people can!) we can hang on to it and be sure that in the waters of baptism God did say to us, irreversibly, 'You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.' Even our greatest sin and shame – our embarrassment with ourselves - cannot wipe out this identity he gave us then. So, if we are ever tested and at our lowest ebb, we can join with the Protestant reformer Luther in answering the devil as he tries to tell us that we're just not good enough for God to love, by saying the simple but triumphant words 'I am baptised!' In baptism we were united with Christ, who was baptised for us, and in our union with Christ the Father smiles on us, loves us, and strengthens us, just as he smiled on him.

Maggie Guite

Songs of thankfulness

- 1 Songs of thankfulness and praise,
Jesu, Lord, to thee we raise,
manifested by the star,
to the sages from afar;
branch of royal David's stem
in thy birth at Bethlehem:
anthems be to thee addressed
God in Man made manifest.

- 2 Manifest at Jordan's stream,
Prophet, Priest and King supreme;
and at Cana wedding-guest
in thy Godhead manifest;
manifest in power divine,
changing water into wine:
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in Man made manifest.

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

- 3 Manifest in making whole
palsied limbs and fainting soul;
manifest in valiant fight,
quelling all the devil's might;
manifest in gracious will,
ever bringing good from ill:
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in Man made manifest.
- 4 Grant us grace to see thee, Lord,
mirrored in thy holy word;
may we imitate thee now,
and be pure, as pure art thou;
that we like to thee may be
at thy great Epiphany;
and may praise thee, ever blest,
God in Man made manifest.

Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885), and Compilers of 'Rejoice and Sing'
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Hail to the Lord's anointed

- 1 Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free,
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

2 He comes, with succour speedy,
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,
their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying,
were precious in his sight.

3 He shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;
that love, joy, hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth;
before him, on the mountains,
shall peace the herald go;
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

4 Kings shall bow down before him,
and gold and incense bring;
all nations shall adore him,
his praise all people sing;
to him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend,
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.

5 O'er every foe victorious,
he on his throne shall rest;
from age to age more glorious,
all-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand for ever,
his changeless name of Love.

James Montgomery (1771-1854)

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Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021
The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

Closing Prayer

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.
Amen

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

Reflection for Epiphany 3 January 2021

Any visitor to the Holy Land today can't but be impressed by the buildings still standing constructed over 2000 years' ago by Herod the Great. There are the colossal stones of the western wall which formed the outer walls of the Temple, in Jerusalem; Herod's winter palace perched on the outcrop of rock by the Dead Sea at Masada and Herodium, just one of many fortresses he constructed throughout Palestine.

These buildings tell us a great deal about Herod.

He could be kind – he rebuilt the Temple for the Jews; he understood its symbolic purpose and significance for worship of the one God; there are records of him reducing taxes in times of hardship and even melting down his gold plate to buy food for the starving poor.

But he didn't rule the difficult Roman province of Palestine for 43 years merely by being kind, he was ruthless to all those who opposed him or who threatened his power. In old age when he saw that he didn't have long to live, he murdered his wife Mariamne and assassinated his three sons who were governing parts of Palestine. The Emperor Augustus famously quipped that it was safer to be a pig in Herod's court than Herod's son.

And so, the story of Herod's reaction to the rumour that a new-born child was destined to be king was to slaughter all the first-born children, and this was certainly not out of character. Herod cared little for religion – he did not, in fact, build the Temple out of reverence for God but to buy the goodwill of the priests and people.

No wonder then that the Gospel records that when Herod heard the news about Jesus' birth not only was he afraid but 'all Jerusalem with him' (Matthew 2:3) – just imagine how frightening it would have been as an ordinary citizen in Jerusalem on hearing that Herod was in one of his murderous moods.

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

I have been pondering the character of Herod and his extreme reaction to religion in general and specifically the birth of Christ and seeing in him the anti-religious Herods of our day. Our culture is happy to tolerate religion and Christianity if it is no more than a harmless adornment but as soon as it appears to threaten the status quo, then society lashes out and attempts to silence it and have it removed from public view.

So vocal have these Herods become, that large numbers of ordinary people are frightened of sharing their view: public figures refrain from expressing their religious views; the media mock and ridicule religious views as the safer and more acceptable option; even we might be reluctant to express our religious views for fear of repercussions.

So, who are the modern day Herods, the anti-religious tyrants? Rupert Shortt, the religion editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, offers a most perceptive and readable answer in his short book *Does Religion Do More Harm than Good?* (2019). I recommend it to you.

The most vocal Herods are the so-called 'new-atheists' such as the Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins, the journalist Christopher Hitchens, the philosopher Daniel Dennett and TV presenter and actor Stephen Fry. They aren't just indifferent to religion; they are evangelically against it. They take every opportunity to argue that religion is the source of hatred, child abuse, war, sexism, racism and lack of progress.

Of course, as Rupert Shortt argues, there are plenty of examples to support their argument, for as Plaise Pascal famously said, 'men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they act from religious conviction' (Shortt p.8). Few deny the wrongness of Islamic terrorist bombings, forced conversions by Christian missionaries and brutal punishments carried out by the medieval Church. But we need to look deeper into the the arguments of the anti-religious Herods – what is their real motivation? Is their motivation really anti-religion or fear?

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021

The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany

What kind of things might cause people to fear religion? For some it is that religion is irrational and that its followers do strange things. I can sympathise with this to an extent. Think how odd, bizarre and even irrational Holy Communion is when viewed from the outside – especially when words such as ‘the blood of Christ’ are uttered.

But this is the point. Culture and religion often do seem bizarre when viewed in a detached and objective way. Rupert Shortt reminds the anti-religionist that religion and culture have always been bound up with each other, and their attack on ‘pure’ religion makes no sense. For, as we know when we go on holiday to a foreign country or visit a family whose traditions are very different from our own, what we enjoy and appreciate, if we allow ourselves to enter into the spirit of the culture, are its differences and new ways of seeing the world.

Religion is yet another distinctive aspect of human culture adding to it with inspiring music, art, architecture and literature, but most significantly it is a source of a deeper spiritual knowledge which sustains and nourishes the human soul. Religion and faith cannot be viewed from the outside intellectually; they have to be entered into and lived.

It is this spiritual knowledge which forms the heart of the Epiphany story. The unexpected twist to the story is that it takes the philosopher-scientists-magi from a very different culture to see what the sceptical, self-absorbed Herod would not allow himself to see, that in the most unexpected and bizarre way the light of God’s wisdom was to be found in a child.

In our present sceptical culture, we have a major job to do: we have to show how the anti-religionist is only telling a selective half-story of religion and Christianity; we have to make those fearful of expressing a religious faith confident that they are not misguided but guided – guided by the light (Isaiah 60:3) of God’s wisdom and that that faith is not bizarre and dangerous but deeply sustaining of the human spirit.

Michael Wilcockson

Materials for Virtual Worship - Sunday, 10 January 2021
The Baptism of Christ - the first Sunday after Epiphany