

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Jacobson
Epiphany 1: The Baptism of Our Lord
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC, Solemn Mass
9 January 2022

Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 89:20–29; Acts 10:34–38; Luke 3:15–22*

A week or so ago, Fr. Smith asked me whether I had included a picture from the December drop-in day in the prior issue of the parish newsletter, the Angelus. The Neighbors in Need ministry at St. Mary's organizes and distributes clothing and other basic necessities for our drop-in days on the third Friday of each month. It's an important outreach ministry of the parish and I had put a picture in that week's Angelus. Following the Feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrated on Thursday, I've been reflecting on the importance of the picture in ways I hadn't before.

I've been thinking about how it not only makes the program more visible to our community, increasing awareness and inviting others to join in, advertising in a sense, but it also helps to make Christ visible here at St. Mary's. Christ manifests himself in many ways and we ought not to lose sight of that.

At the Feast of the Epiphany, also known as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, we heard about the Magi that traveled to the Christ child and worshipped him.¹ The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek ἐπιφάνεια, which has a sense of "appearance" or "manifestation".² A related verb in Greek can sometimes refer to the appearance of light such as providing light in the darkness or the rising of the sun,³ imagery that also does work well for Christ.

The Eastern Church tends to use a similar word, theophany, for this day, where "theo-" specifies that the appearance we are speaking of is indeed God's. On the Eastern Church's feast, the focus is on the Baptism of our Lord as the epiphany, which we commemorate today on this First Sunday after the Epiphany.

As we heard in our gospel reading from Luke, Jesus' divinity is also made manifest in this scene. The heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove and a voice comes down

¹ Matthew 2:1-12.

² Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 385.

³ Ibid. (ἐπιφαίνω)

from heaven, saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."⁴

An ancient celebration of the Epiphany on January sixth initially developed in the East, but it didn't just focus on a single event such as Jesus' baptism. Yale's Andrew McGowan, an Anglican priest as well as a scholar of Church history, describes the earliest Epiphanies in the East as being "a thematic celebration of Jesus' appearance and [his] sonship."⁵

For example, in addition to the Baptism of Our Lord, or the Magi, the early feast days also celebrated events such as the Wedding at Cana.⁶ In our lectionary, we will hear this story next Sunday, though it only comes up on the Second Sunday after Epiphany every three years.

Epiphany is an older celebration than Christmas and in some places also within the Latin, Western, Church, it was initially celebrated in this earlier thematic sense. In many places, however, such as the Roman and African churches, Epiphany didn't begin to be celebrated until after Christmas had already taken hold and become well-established, sometime in the fourth century, and so an emphasis on the Magi, an epiphany event tied closely to the nativity, became the dominant focus.⁷

The early Church's tradition of a more thematic approach to Epiphany, which especially shines through for us this year with the Wedding at Cana next week, emphasizes the fact the God was not just revealed at once place at one time. With this in mind, I think we can also tie in our Epiphany celebration to Christ manifesting himself here, in many ways, including the work of our Neighbors in Need program: Christ manifest in the Body of Christ.

As I was reading about the history of Epiphany in Fr. McGowan's helpful book, *Ancient Christian Worship*, I wandered over to his chapter on baptism in the early Church, given today's Gospel lesson that both touches on John the Baptist's ministry as well as Jesus' baptism. The early Church retained John's themes of repentance and forgiveness in baptism, but the importance of the Holy Spirit, which we

⁴ Luke 3:22.

⁵ Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 252.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 256-257.

also heard today, emphasized in Jesus' baptism, comes through as a central theme.⁸

And, importantly, participating in the life of the Spirit is connected to Christ and his mission. In the East, and especially the early Syrian Church, there is a strong sense in baptism of "entering and leaving the Jordan with [Jesus] to fulfill" one's divine vocation.⁹ Many texts from the early Church also show a tight connection in thinking about baptism with the Eucharist.¹⁰

One of Paul's well-known images for baptism is that of dying and rising.¹¹ But, perhaps we could also describe one way understanding of baptism in the early Church as rising from the waters of baptism to feed on the Body and Blood of Christ in order to continue the work of Jesus, as members of his body.

This seems to me to relate to another of the ways that Paul talks about baptism. He describes it as clothing ourselves with Christ.¹² Putting on the right clothes for the task at hand. And, of course, others will be able to see what we are wearing.

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that the Gospel lesson read at Mass on Friday, the day after Epiphany, was Matthew's description of Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him.¹³ Jesus calls them into service and they drop their fishing nets and follow.

The manifestation of God in this world isn't just about being in awe of it, even if it is something of course to be in awe of. But, it is also a question of where does it lead and, especially, how can it lead to a manifestation of our own call to serve, to continue to make Christ visible to the world.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁸ Ibid, 141.

⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁰ Ibid, 160-161.

¹¹ Romans 6:1-14.

¹² Galatians 3:27.

¹³ Matthew 4:12-25.