



Rev. Jackie Bernacchi

All Saints Episcopal Church
301 South Main
Minot, ND 58701

www.minot.com/~allsaint

© 2004
All Saints Episcopal Church

January 9, 2005

Today we celebrate two Manifestations of Christ, the feast of the Epiphany and the Baptism of our Lord. We are in the season of Epiphany, which is a very strong Christmas theme taken forward.

The season of Epiphany is the time of the Church's proclamation of the appearance of Christ to Israel and the nations. Today we complete our crib scene by placing the three wisemen -- astrologers, most likely -- at the stable -- probably not where they found the child at all but, still, it completes our symbolism.

The word epiphany transliterates a Greek verb meaning to manifest, or appear openly.

We call several things epiphanies. Sometimes we use it when the meaning of something is made suddenly clear, like understanding that your own suffering in life has shaped your compassion for others. That's a modern use.

The manifestation that we are talking about in conjunction with this word, and ancient world, was a manifestation of the Devine. In the old testament there were several epiphanies; the burning bush, as God speaking to Moses, was a kind of epiphany -- a manifestation of God.

More than a thousand years later, a pre-Christian, Syrian ruler -- a very nasty fellow who was a little too impressed with himself -- called himself Antiochius (epiphany). He, apparently, thought of himself as the appearance of a god on earth. No ego deficit in that family I can tell you.

But, we counter any such pretenders to the throne by proclaiming Christ epiphany -- Christ, the manifestation of God, on earth. That is what this season is all about and in a real way that is what all the Gospel stories are about.

Then, it follows that the second part of today's commemoration, the baptism of Christ, is also a form of epiphany. It informs the concept of how the manifestation of God was revealed and why. Now, this "how" and "why" has many facets in the Gospels. Jesus, with his life, reveals God in many ways; he reveals God's intent of care, mercy, love and justice. Again this is a point of the many Gospel stories.

Matthew tells his epiphany story with the birth, the kingdom of heaven, coming to earth in the form of a baby. Matthew is eager that we should know that the child is the much awaited messiah -- Jesus is the ruler from the house of David in Bethlehem, he is the one spoken of by old testament prophets, he is the light to be shared with all nations.

And, Matthew makes it quite clear that this light, this epiphany is from the one god and is guided and protected by God.

In today's story of the baptism we begin a dramatic revelation of God in Christ. The baptism is understood by most scholars with historical certainty, the early Church would not have made this story up because it really makes little sense to them -- why would God's son seek a baptism of repentance?

The early Church was puzzled, even confused, by this. St. Jerome cited a certain Gospel-like story, called, according to the Hebrews, in which Jesus counters a suggestion by his mother to be baptized, "With in what have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by John?" Clearly, the idea of Christ submitting to the baptism of repentance caused early Christian thinkers some problems. But, problematic or no, evangelists included the baptism story in all the Gospels.

And, lucky for us they did. Yet, it gives us a glimpse into the customs of the early Church. John's baptism of repentance and, yes, even Christ's controversial baptism, helped the Church baptize for reasons other than just church membership. Repentance and forgiveness of sin were part of adult baptisms.

And, this baptism story teaches more than one thing about the living epiphany; we learn something of the "why" of Christ on earth and the "how" of his manifestation in a very deliberate way.

Matthew's rendition of the baptism of Christ says he went to the Jordan to be baptized by his kinsman, John. Next, is the idea of protest on John's side, because he is baptizing for personal repentance and, somehow, John knows that Jesus is an innocent man, without sin.

And, finally, the Jesus reason -- to fulfill all righteousness -- which, is loaded and is at the heart of

this manifestation. Jesus is fulfilling God's will. He is taking the first step in his adult life to make his way to the cross for all sinners, for all history.

Jesus, with complete free will, was being obedient to the plan, to its first important step: to live and to die as the penitent for all humanity. He had to, first, assume the role of the penitent humanity and he does this at his baptism.

Jesus is, now, not just the Davidist King spoken of by old testament prophets, he is something else . . . he is the suffering servant of Isaiah, as well, the one willing to take on the sins of the world.

The scene brings with it an understanding of why God is visiting earth. Jesus is the manifestation of God's compassion for sinful man, God's love and refusal to give up on his creation.

Matthew's baptism scene includes even more epiphany material, as well as the revelation of a father 's tenderness and pride in a son.


In Matthew, the heavens open to Jesus and his father speaks, "This is my son, the beloved. With whom I am well pleased." The implication of the voice is difficult to miss. Heaven itself has again called down to proclaim Jesus the epiphany.

Now, let me take the concept of the Epiphany of Jesus one more step. As I said earlier, the Gospels are full of epiphanies, full of revelation of the epiphany -- Christ as the miracle worker healing bodies, raising them from the dead and restoring lives to society, and forgiveness, revealing him as God and revealing the compassion of God. It also reveals that God desires us to be whole and happy.

Christ domination of nature in calming storms, walking on water, reveals him as God and his power over all that is created.

And, of course, the revelation of God in Christ as the dying criminal on the cross reveals a sort of sacrificial love of both father and son, what we still find remarkable. One person, both God and Man, died for our wicked rebellion and re-wove the tattered relationship between God and all men.

Now, the manifestations of God's love cannot end here.



To just admire a man for his sanctity and sacrifice makes Christ no different from any other holy man of history. Christ is different. He is the manifestation of God, a living God.

● Ours is a religion that worships him as he now lives and emulates him as he did live. This is our Christian charge -- to continue the manifestation to the earth. All that Christ was on earth, we are called to be: loving, unselfish, reconciling, sacrificial, out reaching, healing.

● Ours is a religion that calls us to participate in the Epiphany started so long ago in Bethlehem.