

+

Our Lessons for Epiphany tide are concerned with revealing to us the whole truth about Jesus' Incarnation. The Gospel readings for this season describe the various manifestations or Epiphanies through which Jesus showed himself to the world. On the Feast of the Epiphany itself Jesus is manifested to Gentile wise men, showing that He is not only the Messiah of Israel, but also the Saviour of everyone, of the whole world. Last week He showed Himself to us as a precocious pre-adolescent boy who comes to the temple to assert his connection to his heavenly Father, astounding the wisemen of the Temple. Today's Epiphany comes at Jesus' baptism. He is manifested not only as the Messiah, but also as God's Son and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. It is again a sign of how far Jesus is willing to go, and to what depths He will descend for our salvation.

The Gospel begins with the ancient prophecy of the prophet Malachi, identifying John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, as the *voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*. And so effective was St. John at *preparing the way of the Lord*, that all of Judea, and Jerusalem – even the sophisticated city folks, came out to hear John preach and to be baptized by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*. According to tradition John baptized in the Jordan River at the same spit through which the Ark of the Covenant had been transported, and through which the Israelites entered the Promised Land. But whether or not this pious opinion is true, the fact that all of Israel came to John to confess their sins and be baptized in the muddy, fly infested banks of the river Jordan must have sent quite a message. We remember the story of Naaman and Elisha, who was so offended by the idea of bathing seven times in the Jordan River that he nearly missed his miracle. It sends quite the message to us, as the Jordan River has been enshrined in hymns as a Christian metaphor, we often imagine it to be some large, flowing river of clean, pure, water. And yet in reality, it is a small shallow river, with banks swarming with flies, and water so muddy it is hard to believe that anything could ever live in its waters.

It is almost shocking to think that Jesus came to John to be baptized in that river, and that water. And whereas everyone else had something to confess to John when they came to be baptized, notice that none of the Gospels mention Jesus confessing His sins to John the Baptist. This is because Jesus, as God in the flesh, has no sin. It makes sense that John would recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It makes sense that John would say to Jesus, *you want to be baptized by me? And I am not even worthy to untie your shoes!* In

Matthew's Gospel John goes so far as to forbid Jesus, *but John forbid Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?* How shocking it must have been for John, who recognized Jesus as the Lamb of God, as the sinless Son of God, for him to baptize Jesus in that muddy, dirty water. This challenges all of our mental conceptions about the Baptism of Jesus, and even still it was on this occasion that the heavens open, the dove descends and the voice from heaven is heard. And yet, while the Baptism of Jesus is more shocking than we might have previously thought, yet it has the Father's approval, *Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*

But the Baptism of Jesus into the dirty water of the Jordan River should not surprise us. We know well the story of His Nativity, how He comes down into the messiness of our fallen world, born in a stable, a place for animals. We remember also that He grew up and lived for nearly thirty years in the ancient backwater town of Nazareth, long before the advent of our clean and hygienic modern conveniences. He comes down into a muddy, dirty, and fallen world for our salvation. He is baptized into the muddy and dirty Jordan River so that we may be baptized for the remission of our sins, and so that we may become the adopted sons and daughters of God. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity, into the life of Christ, which begins the cleansing and purifying of our own souls, so that this Epiphany light may shine in and through us, so that we may be better members of the Body of Christ, the Church.

One of St. Paul's important teachings about Baptism is that just as we are made members of the Church, the Body of Christ through baptism, so we each have a function and role for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ. Just as human bodies have different organs and other mechanisms, each of which has something specific to do to promote the health and general welfare of the whole. Individual Christians have gifts which we are supposed to use for everyone else's benefit, not to call attention to ourselves. Whatever our own particular gifts may be, there are things everyone can do to help the body function in a healthy way and show Jesus to the world as effectively as possible. There are simple things we can each do to strengthen and polish ourselves spiritually so that we may better reflect the light of Christ, all far easier talked about than actually accomplished. St. Paul writes that we should abhor evil and choose the good, to be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, he writes that we should be generous and hospitable both to one another and to people outside the church. Besides these social, more interpersonal things, St. Paul writes that the way we conduct our individual lives

will be an advertisement for Christianity, whether we are always aware of it or not. Our choice is whether we will be an advertisement which attracts people to Christ and His Church or repels them.

Let us ask ourselves this morning if we are happy and excited to be Christians. Does our relationship to Christ fill us with joy and hope, or are we negative, despairing and bitter? Do we bear our burdens and sorrows, and the burdens and sorrows of our fellow Christians with patience, or are we quick to lapse into despair, self-pity, and criticism? Do we pray, and do we seek the prayers of others? Do we try to have a charitable, forgiving and understanding attitude toward everyone else, or are we quick to criticize and feel superior and complain that our interests are not being served? Of course, none of us does these as well as we might. But there is in a certain sense the fact that we spend our lives growing into our Baptisms and into Christ. We are reminded of the words of Proverbs, *the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day*. Jesus' baptism was a beginning and revelation, a rich, dramatic and earth-shattering beginning and revelation, to be sure. We are responsible for continuing the story, for continuing to participate in Jesus' epiphany, His showing Himself to the world. Once we have been baptized and have committed ourselves to Him, there should be no turning back. May the Epiphany of our Lord illuminate and enlighten us to ourselves, to ways that we have failed and to ways in which we can become better.