

A Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for the First Sunday of Epiphany: The Baptism of Christ.

And so, the season changes. From the season of Christmas to the season of Epiphany.

Unfortunately, we are also in a new season with the pandemic. Once again, having to stay at home to save lives and to protect the NHS. Gathering around our computers to worship, instead of being together in our church buildings. But remembering that the word Epiphany, comes from the Greek 'epiphaneia'; meaning appearing or revealing, I wonder, I wonder if this season of lockdown might be a time when we, through having to spend so much more time at home, might experience revelation? Can we perhaps, see this time as an opportunity? A time to hunker down and take some time out to be with God? My hope and prayer for us all in this new season of lockdown, is that there is something to be revealed to all of us through this new way of being church.

The season of Epiphany is short this year, a brief season when we move from mangers and swaddling clothes to stories of revelation. Kings and stars, doves and voices. In Celtic spirituality, the Epiphany stories are stories of 'thin places'. Places where the boundary between the everyday and the eternal, between heaven and earth become permeable. God in God's graciousness pulls back the curtain so we can catch glimpses of God's glory. The season of Epiphany encourages us to look beyond the ordinary of the world and discover the extraordinary. To gaze on Jesus and see the revelation of Godself. A first epiphany.

The season began on Wednesday (6th January) when we remembered the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus. At that moment, Jesus was revealed to the wider world. His visitors, those learned scholars from the East, were unlikely to be Jewish. Jesus' other natal visitors, the shepherds, would most likely to have been Jewish. That encounter between the Magi and the Christ Child, a revelation of Godself as a gift to the whole world and not just to Israel. The Christ, revealed as a Saviour for the gentiles as well as the longed for hope of Israel. A second epiphany.

At the time of our Gospel reading, (Mark 1: 4 – 11) the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah was profound within the hearts of the people of God. Then John appeared in the wilderness preaching repentance, baptism and the coming of the Kingdom of God. I wonder if there were some of the people of God hoping that John himself was that Messiah. Some who questioned if this man who lived in the wilderness, who challenged them to re-examine their relationship with God and each other - whether he could possibly be the Messiah? John is unequivocal. He tells the people of God that he is the one that is showing the way to the Messiah. He is the one making straight the paths of the Lord. He describes himself as unfit even to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. By his words and actions John reveals to the people of God something of the nature of Jesus. Jesus will be far greater than John. Instead of baptizing with water from the river Jordan, Jesus will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit.

Mark doesn't tell us very much about the actual baptism of Jesus, he moves very quickly to discuss the moment of epiphany. The revelation of who Jesus actually is; the moment that heaven opens and God's voice can be heard acknowledging Jesus. God claiming Jesus as his Son and telling Jesus of his great pleasure in him. Then the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus in the form of a dove anointing him for his ministry. A baptism epiphany.

The baptism epiphany echoing the epiphany of the Magi when they visited Jesus as a baby. Their presence, a revelation of Jesus being for all the nations. Then the gifts that the Magi bought revealing something of the nature of Jesus. Gold, a gift fit for a king, the King of Heaven. Frankincense that was burnt in the temple. The sweet, white smoke it produces representing holiness. Jesus the revelation of Godself. Myrrh, a resin or oil which was rubbed on dead bodies. Revelation of Jesus, who in his humanity, through his life, death and resurrection would be the new Covenant between humanity and God. All these epiphanies drawing back the curtain, giving

us a glimpse of who Jesus is. King, God and Man, Son of God. Saviour for the whole world.

So, what do all these revelations or epiphanies mean for us today? It has been said that as Christians we need to practice epiphany. Epiphany is a challenge to look again, to look harder and to see afresh. To find our thin place and no matter how difficult life is, hang onto the possibility of surprise. The New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, suggests that the revelation of Godself in Jesus, is himself, our thin place. Jesus is the one who thins the boundary between heaven and earth. Jesus the one who shows us the God we long for. Jesus the one who offers each of us a new relationship with the God of love. Jesus the one who stands beside us in all that life offers or throws at us. Jesus who stands with us at the water's edge so that we might hear the voice that can tell us who and whose we really are. Jesus who helps us listen for that voice. The voice that tells us that we are all God's own beloved children. We are God's creation and God's pleasure. So, can we, in this strangest season of epiphany, be open to being surprised? To look for revelation even in the midst of difficulties? Can this be our season of epiphaneia? When we hear God's voice of revelation, acceptance and of love.

Amen