

SUNDAY BETWEEN 1st & 6th JANUARY - Year A

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

THE EPIPHANY or MANIFESTATION OF CHRIST TO THE GENTILES

January 6th is the 12th day of Christmas, the commemoration of the visit of the Wise Men to the newly-born Jesus, and the end of the Christmas Season. St. Matthew records that "when they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh." (Matt. 2:10,11) The Gospel for the day describes the visit and the worship of the Christ-Child by the first non-Jews. the wise men from the east.

For centuries, the Jews had been looking for the coming of the Messiah, who would lift them up to heights of glory and make their nation Top Nation in the world, as it had been according to tradition in the days of the great King David. It is significant that Matthew, himself a Jew and writing originally for the benefit of Christian Jews, should choose to include in his account of the Nativity of Jesus the incident which proclaims loudly and clearly that Jesus is the Man for all mankind.

Folklore has taken over the actual wording of St .Matthew's record and turned the wise men into three kings, representing the three major ethnic groups: those with European fair skins, those with dark skins like the Negroid races, and those with yellow skins like Asiatics. The implication was that all mankind was represented as there worshipping the infant Christ. Sometimes these three kings are shown as being representative of people in various stages of life - one a youth, one middle aged, one elderly - suggesting that all mankind, regardless of age was represented.

The first thing St. Matthew is telling us, and which legend simply pads out, is that the Christ came not just to be the Saviour of His own people, but of all mankind, of all races and of all age groups.

Then he tells us that the wise men were guided by a star to Christ. There are various theories about that star. For one thing, the position of the stars at certain times have always been understood by astrologers to indicate significant happenings, and the wise men were almost certainly astrologers. Astronomers have tried to identify that star: Halley's Comet was about the place in the year 12 BC. In 7BC the planet Jupiter crossed the paths of Venus and Saturn, so I'm led to believe. It is a bit hard to think of identifying one house in a village because of a star, even a very bright one - shining directly overhead. But something had made these wise men set off to find Christ.

I wonder what made you set off to find Christ, to begin your spiritual pilgrimage? Whatever it was, it was not in the usual way we meet people and become friends - it was not because we physically met Him and were attracted to Him. More likely it was because of someone we admired who was a churchgoer. Or because we were drawn into church circles by our parents or friends, It might have been because we thought it was the right thing to do. But who gave us that idea? With each one of us, something or someone acted as a star to draw our attention to Christ.

The church building itself ought to be a star to the neighbourhood. That's why churches used to be built on a hill, with a spire, to be plainly visible, catching the eye. That's why it is good when a

church has a bell, rung before services, to catch the ear of the careless and the unheeding. Sometimes a church building isn't very attractive, neglected, and in need of repair or painting. That suggests that the folk who worship there do not see a vision of their church as a star, to attract people to the worship of God. Our buildings ought to be attractive and well-cared for, for that reason.

We church people ought to be stars - men and women who by the brightness of our lives and dispositions may lead others to the ultimate source of all the world's brightness. It is not books or philosophies or music or even sermons that will lead people who are outside the Church in the direction of Christ. It is the person who is scrupulously honest in business dealings; who is cheerful in the face of adversity; who has time to listen and talk and even weep with someone in trouble; who can point others to the source of their own light. Not that it always works out that way, I'm afraid - our own light tends to be dimmer at some times than at others, so we ourselves must also be seeking to come nearer to Christ all the time.

When these wise men arrived in Christ's presence they presented gifts. The test of a person's sincerity is whether he will back his beliefs financially. That is a test which works in all situations in life. "Put your money where your mouth is"; "Put up or shut up" are common sayings which illustrate the point. It underlines the reality of our faith, for our giving represents part of ourselves. Usually it comes out of our earnings, what we have worked for, and we might have spent it on ourselves, on little luxuries which we undoubtedly deserve. Instead we chose to offer it to God, for the support, maintenance, and extension of His work. That is why the taking up of the collection in the service of worship is part of the worship. The sidesmen don't take it off you as an entrance fee, otherwise we would install turnstiles! Nor do they take it and put it in the safe as soon as they have taken up the collection. It is taken to the altar and dedicated, as part of our whole offering. The old prayer in the 1662 Order put it well:

"We humbly beseech Thee most mercifully to accept our alms - that is our freely given gifts - our oblations' - that is the bread and the wine - and to receive these our prayers which we offer unto Thy divine majesty."

The fact that later these monetary gifts are used for such mundane purposes as paying the electricity bill or buying mop oil or as part of the priest's stipend is incidental - it is the free offering which counts as far as the giver is concerned. The use to which it is put is a different aspect of stewardship - the proper use of gifts made for the Church to use in Christ's work.

The wise men when they arrived at Christ's cradle, worshipped first and then they opened their treasures. The treasures themselves were highly significant. Please don't go off thinking that the Church is only after your cash - what we offer in a representative way is the whole of life! The gold and the frankincense and the myrrh might be said to represent the whole of life - wealth, culture and suffering: all offered to Christ. And they are pretty ineffective unless they are so offered.

The world takes a lot of convincing that gold itself is not the miracle worker - wealth does not automatically produce happiness. It used to be thought that a higher rate of income would produce a higher standard of living and so reduce crime. Places with the highest standard of living have also a

high crime and suicide rate. The truth is that riches alone are insufficient - riches without worship are dangerous.

What about frankincense? What about culture? Is our modern civilization really producing contented happy people? Is modern science smoothing the way to a peaceful, well-adjusted world? Or adding to our fears of the future? Science and culture, like wealth, must be dedicated to God before they will really benefit mankind.

And thirdly the wise men presented myrrh, traditionally representing grief and suffering. We tend to take for granted, unthinkingly, that trouble is an automatic educator. "Experience is the best teacher", we say. Not so I'm afraid. We are very slow to learn from past errors, and when we do, it is probably because we have taken our calamities to Christ and learned a better way from Him.

So the Epiphany is to remind us and to urge us to follow those stars that lead to Christ. Whether we are rich or cultivated or sorrowful, or a combination in varying degrees of all three, our way of life and our possessions will profit us nothing unless they are laid at Christ's feet. In practice this means being a person who worships God; who worships intelligently; who worships consistently; who worships with others who have likewise offered themselves and all that they have to Christ.

AMEN

SUNDAY BETWEEN 7th & 13 JANUARY - Year A

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for the day viz. Matthew 3:13-17)

The Season of Christmas ended on January 6th, the Festival of The Epiphany, the traditional 12th Day of Christmas. Now the Church bids us get on with the ordinary round of worship and service, since life cannot always be lived at the high points, and for the most part has to be just jogged along at an ordinary level.

But no Sundays are ordinary unless we forget our principle duty of that day - to worship with other members of the Family of God. If it still seems ordinary, even then, we need to think again of the wonder of our God whom we worship, and remember His great love for us as individuals, and our need for forgiveness and strengthening. If we approach Sundays with those things in mind, none would be "ordinary", in the ordinary sense of the word.

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, the theme is the Baptism of Jesus. The Gospel narrative for Year A, this year, was as we heard, St. Matthew's version; next year we will hear St. Mark's version; and the year after we have St. Luke's. Fortunately for our three-year cycle St. John did not describe the Baptism of Jesus. So over the period of three years we have the important incident of our Lord's Baptism presented to us by three reporters, and so the story has all the various aspects and implications considered. Jesus was about 30 years of age when John the Baptist came to the River Jordan and began calling people to repentance in readiness for the coming of the Messiah. Until then Jesus had been quietly following the trade of carpenter in the village of Nazareth in Galilee, and showing no apparent signs of His destiny or divinity. No miracles, no preaching, no healings. Certainly as far as history records. Presumably Mary, His mother, had told Him of the wonderful happenings at His birth, and of the angel Gabriel's earlier statement: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David." (Luke 1:32) Quite a thing to have hanging over your head! He must have wondered if and when and how such a prophecy might come about. When the news of the preaching of John the Baptist and the religious revival that accompanied it reached Nazareth, Jesus knew that the long-awaited hour had struck. He must leave His carpenter's bench and His family and His village, and go. It seems that John immediately recognized Jesus for Who and What He was, for he raised the objection: "I need to be baptized by you - surely you do not need to come to me!" He had said previously: "I baptize with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John was right in raising his objection - his baptism signified the washing away of sin. It was for those who were prepared to confess their sins, turn away from them, and receive God's forgiveness. But the sinless Christ had nothing of which to repent. Why then did Jesus insist? The answer is this: in submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was taking His stand by the side of the sinners He had come to save. In His baptism, Jesus made Himself one with sinful men and women. His baptism was His first act in revealing His love for them. It was an act of identification. At the River Jordan, as later on at Calvary, Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors", in accordance with Isaiah's prophecy. (Is.53:12)

There is an interesting little variation in one or two translations of St. Matthew's record of the event which occurred immediately after our Lord's baptism. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible says: "and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove." (v.16) But the very old King James Version and the quite recent Good News Version say: "heaven was opened to him". Apparently there is a variation in the early writings and either is correct. To man, in his sinful state, heaven is closed, and must be closed, because heaven is where God is and sin cannot exist where there is perfection. But to this man as He dedicates Himself to His mission as the Messiah of God, heaven is opened, suggesting that He is indeed totally sinless.

Then Jesus saw "the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on Him." Here is another piece of symbolism, somewhat similar to the Passover manifestation - the sound of rushing wind and the appearance of tongues of fire to show visually that the Holy Spirit had indeed come upon those present. We may think of this manifestation as the Father's response to Jesus' dedication to service: Jesus endowed with the Holy Spirit to equip Him for the Mission He had just undertaken to fulfill as the promised Messiah. The word "Messiah" or its equivalent "Christ", means "anointed one" - in Old Testament times priests and kings were anointed with oil and solemnly consecrated or set apart for the office they were to fulfill. Anointing is still part of the Coronation Service of English kings and queens. In His baptism, Jesus as God's Messiah was anointed with the Holy Spirit for His role. So began His ministry, and immediately He faced the temptations put to Him in the wilderness empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome them.

It is worth noting the significance of the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Symbolically the dove represents gentleness and meekness, and it was with these two attributes of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was to exercise His ministry. We may be sure that God never withholds His Spirit from those who give themselves to Him. When He calls us to do any work for Him, He gives us strength for the task, though we might not experience outward manifestations such as a dove or wind or fire.

The third sign at the baptism - the others being the heavens opened and the dove alighting - was the voice heard from heaven. Again a little variation in the records, this time between the recorders themselves: Mark and Luke have the voice speaking directly to Jesus: "Thou art my beloved Son." (Mk.1:11; Lk.3:22) Matthew records the voice saying: "This is my beloved Son", (3:17) probably put in that way to make it quite clear to his readers and hearers the true identity of Jesus: the obedient Son and Servant of the Father; with whom He is well pleased.

One final thing to note in this extremely important episode in the life of Jesus. The dedication of the Incarnate Son is accompanied by the anointing by the Holy Spirit together with the affirmation of the Heavenly Father. The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are present, recognizable, and active in this baptism, as Jesus, truly God and truly Man, takes up His task as the Messiah.

AMEN

SUNDAY BETWEEN 14th & 20th JANUARY - Year A

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

_[Based on the Gospel for today viz. John 1:29-42]

Last Sunday, immediately following the commemoration of the event when Jesus was first revealed as the Christ to non-Jews, the Magi or wise men from the East, we were guided by our lectionary to consider something of the significance of the Baptism of Christ. A jump of some 30 years to the beginning of our Lord's ministry, initiated by His baptism. John the Baptizer drew attention to Him at that time by declaring: "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the World!" And, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29 & 34)

The writers of the first three Gospels depict the role of John the Baptist as preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The fourth Gospel, St. John's, from which today's reading comes, emphasizes his witnessing role with regard to Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God." John has carefully led us up to this declaration in the opening chapter of his Gospel. There is first the prologue in which John proclaims that the Word, which was with God and which was God, became flesh and lived as a man, full of grace and truth. Then there is John the Baptist, the forerunner, saying he is not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor some special prophet, but merely the preparer of the way for One who will be infinitely greater than any of these others. And in today's extract St. John records the Baptist's positive witness and identification: Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Son of God.

John the Baptist used the title "Son of God" for Jesus to designate Him as the Messiah, the promised One, the anointed One. He could hardly have had much idea of our Lord's divine nature - that really only dawned on the disciples much later, and only positively after the resurrection. The title "Lamb of God" was inspirational, as John could only dimly have seen the coming sacrificial ministry of Jesus. The title is familiar as a symbol of Jesus, and it is used in worship at times as an acknowledgement of our Lord's self-sacrifice. But it doesn't occur much in the New Testament, and mainly in the Book of Revelation where it is used to speak of the Lamb upon the Throne - glorified, and of the saints whose robes were made white by the blood of the Lamb - again Christ's sacrificial ministry.

But to the Jews the lamb had great significance in their worship. It was very much the animal of sacrifice. There was hardly a Jewish act of worship in which a lamb was not offered. In the Old Testament story the question Isaac asked his father Abraham was: "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And in several books of the Old Testament regulations are laid down for the offering to God in worship, in dedication, as a sin-offering, as a thanksgiving, of a pure lamb.

And still today the lamb is the symbol of innocence, meekness, lowliness, gentleness, of a life which would never cause hurt or harm to anyone. This romanticism persists, even with people in pastoral situations who have to feed and cope with the real thing! The lamb is often the symbol of utter dependence. God is the Shepherd of mankind. We are the people and the sheep of His pasture, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry

them in his bosom", wrote Isaiah. (40:11) So the name expresses the complete trust and dependence of Jesus on God His Father.

But the most common use of the pure, innocent, dependent lamb was its being offered to God to make atonement for sins committed by its owner: something worthwhile and costly and pure and innocent given to God. Indeed destroyed by fire so that it could not be used for anything else. So no Jew could ever hear Jesus called the Lamb without thinking of Him as the sacrifice and offering to God whereby atonement was made for the sin of mankind, and through whom mankind and God are reconciled.

However it was in the identification of Jesus with the sacrificial Passover lamb which has made the greatest impact on His followers. The story of the first Passover is told in the Book of Exodus, chapter 12. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, and in spite of repeated demonstrations of the power of God, Pharaoh had refused to let them go from Egypt to their promised land. So there came the last terrible act. The angel of the Lord was to pass over the land, slaying the first-born son in every home. But before this happened, every Jewish household was to kill a lamb and smear its blood on the door frames of their house, and when the avenging angel saw the mark he would pass over that house, knowing that a family of the people of God lived there.

St. Paul identified the crucified Jesus as the Passover or Paschal Lamb, when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth pleading with them to maintain Christian standards: "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed." (1 Cor.5:7) The Passover lamb was the symbol of deliverance. For the Jews the delivering power of God was clearly and definitely demonstrated in the events which brought them out of Egypt. When Christians see Jesus as the Lamb of God, they see in Him the delivering and rescuing power of God come to earth for the salvation of men and women from their slavery to sin. It was through the death of the first Passover lambs that the Hebrews were saved. It was through the death of the pure and innocent Lamb of God that salvation came whereby men and women are saved from the penalty and the power of their sins.

In the Book of Revelation Jesus is referred to as the Lamb some 29 times. And always it is as the Lamb in triumph. The Lamb has victory, has control over history, has authority, is worshipped, and yet retains His gentle kindness - it is the Lamb who leads those who have suffered for their loyalty to their Lord to the living fountains of water and feeds them. The old sacrificial Passover lamb is compared with Christ the Lamb who was slain. The sacrifice and the agony and the sweat and the tears are there - but to these are added the majesty and the power of the risen Christ - the Lamb set on the very throne of God.

John the Baptist proclaimed more than he could possibly have known when he cried: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The gentleness and the majesty; the suffering and the glory; the humiliation and the exultation of that Jesus who is at one and the same time the victim who died and the victor who is heaven's exalted King.

"Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us."

AMEN

SUNDAY BETWEEN 21st & 27th JANUARY - Year A

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 4:12-25]

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined." Isaiah's prophecy from the first Reading, quoted by Matthew. Earlier in his Gospel Matthew has recorded the visit of the wise men to the Infant Christ; the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism; the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness - which we have temporarily skipped over; and now he focuses our thoughts on the beginning of our Lord's ministry: 'bringing the light of the knowledge and love of God to those who sit in the darkness of ignorance, fear, sin, and superstition. Matthew sees in the beginning of Jesus' public ministry a relationship with, and a fulfilment of that prophecy of Isaiah. It seems that Jesus deliberately went throughout the province of Galilee in order "that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled."

As with all the old prophecies, there seems to be a two-level interpretation: that spoken for the immediate situation in which the prophet is involved, and that to be fulfilled in some measure by Jesus as He showed Himself to be the long-expected Messiah. Isaiah was speaking to his own situation. How aware he was that his words would apply to the Messiah we cannot know. Certainly on a number of occasions Jesus helped the prophecy along by His deliberate action. An example of this is His deliberate decision to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday riding on a donkey. The prophet Zechariah had written: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." (9:9) And you are familiar with the way in which Jesus fulfilled that prophecy.

This particular prophecy of Isaiah's was probably pronounced on the occasion of the deportation of the people of Galilee by the King of Assyria in BC 732. It was a message of comfort to the exiles, looking to a strong saviour who would appear in due course to restore the kingdom to the high place it had held in the reign of King David, some 300 years earlier. This saviour was described as "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." (Is.9:6-7) His arrival will throw light into the darkness of defeat and exile; it will be a prelude to a new era of justice and righteousness.

Matthew saw that this new era of peace and righteousness had dawned with the coming of Jesus. Only, His peace was to be achieved peacefully - He does not establish His Kingdom by military power. Jesus' kingdom is brought about by the inner, personal revolution of conversion, a voluntary changing from one way of life - self centred, to another, God centred. His rule is not imposed upon His people by the compulsion of force or fear, but is drawn out of them in response to His love, His teaching, His example. It is those who listen to Him and carry out His requirements who belong to His Kingdom, and they in turn contribute to the building up of the Kingdom by their love and concern for others. The Good News of Jesus Christ is not merely something to be heard and approved of; the Good News is that people's lives can be changed through the influence of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was talking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee sympathetic to our Lord, He described this conversion, this changing, as being "born again". "Unless one is born anew," He said, "he cannot

see the Kingdom of God." (John 3:3) He meant of course that conversion involved such a total rejection of the old way of life, and such a complete turning to the new way, that it was like a fresh start in life, a new beginning. Not many of us are aware of a particular time when we made a specific decision to be a follower of Christ, a Christian. Probably most people grow up in the faith, renewing their understanding as life unfolds, being re-inspired from time to time by religious experiences in a wide range of incidents. Some of course can actually date their decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. St. Paul, for instance, had a particularly dramatic experience: he was blinded by a brilliant light which caused him to fall off his horse, and he remained blind until a Christian named Ananias healed him. The story is in Acts chapter 9 - it's worth another look. But the reality of a person's religious experience and belief and understanding does not depend upon awareness of a moment of conversion. God's rule begins in our lives as we recognise and respond to Christ's teaching as addressed to us individually. The light which it brings is one which illuminates the dark spots in our lives, and that light might be a brilliant flash or a slow dawning ® either way the experience results in the desire for release from selfishness, jealousy, hatred, lust, gluttony, avarice, bigotry, and all the other unlovely things which afflict mankind to drag us away from God's intention for us.

Having stated that Jesus came to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy in throwing light for those who sit in the darkness of ignorance of the love of God, Matthew portrays Jesus going on to inaugurate the company of believers, the messianic community, the Church. He calls His first disciples, the first four to experience and respond to the Messiah's call: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed Him. Similarly He called James and John. Immediately they left their boat and their father and followed Him.

These were not merely four men who later on decided to form a sort of holy club. They are the beginning of the Church, the example presented to all subsequent would-be disciples who will be drawn by Jesus' teaching. The messianic community is not just an assembly of men and women assenting to Jesus' teaching and example: that community has also the same mission and responsibility to gather others into fellowship and membership and oneness. The vocation of the Christian is not just to be saved himself, but also to draw others to Christ so that they too may be saved and brought into the light of the knowledge of the love of God.

Commitment to Christ does not mean neglect of the world. It involves service to the world in the same spirit in which Jesus served the world and gave Himself for it. And although we might not approve always of what people do, and at times cannot approve and condone the actions of others, yet we are called to follow our Lord's example of love and sympathy for those still stumbling along in darkness. Often they will not appreciate our trying to bring the light of Christ to them - there are those who prefer the darkness, and others who would rather sit in darkness than have us interfere with their so-called freedom. Yet this is part of the work of the Church, and ourselves as members of the Church, to endeavour to be fishers of men, drawing people to the light of Christ.

But first we ourselves must respond as did Peter and Andrew, James and John - "immediately", and with that same ready self-denial.

AMEN