

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Year B

4th January 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." (Mark 1:9)

The Festival of The Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, marks the end of the Christmas Season, and today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we have put before us the first recorded incident in our Lord's adult life: His baptism. Such was the importance of the event in the minds of the writers of the Gospels that Matthew, Mark, and Luke each recorded the occasion. St. John did not write it up - probably because he knew that it had already been well covered, and also because his Gospel is not so much a chronicle of events as a spiritual unveiling of the Saviour. Today we have Mark's version.

As we heard, Mark does not spend much time on the Baptism itself, leaving out Matthew's memory of John the Baptist's reluctance to baptize the one greater than himself, and also Mark omits St. Luke's concentration on the preaching of John the Baptist.

All three record the promise that whereas John baptized with water, after him was coming one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The three also agree on the vision of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus, and on the voice from heaven acknowledging Him as God's beloved Son with whom He is well pleased,

The River Jordan rises near Mount Hermon in the north, and flows south to the lowest point on the earth's surface, the Dead Sea, 1300 feet below sea level. It flows from a place where snow is common, through fertile areas, pasture lands, agricultural areas, fruit-growing districts, and barren wilderness, ending in a sea destitute of life, and fitly called the Dead Sea. It twists and turns so much on its journey that its distance from source to mouth is double that as the crow flies.

Our way through life somewhat resembles that of the River Jordan. Beginning as infants, with most of our powers of body and mind quite undeveloped and unused, we grow in size and strength and intelligence, and after the passing of time we reach old age when bodily and mental powers are again diminished. While all this is happening, we are moving and changing - from infancy to youth, to school, to work, perhaps from one job to another; marriage perhaps with the responsibilities of raising children. Perhaps we change from one house to another in a new location or even country. As we do so we meet with many ups and downs in life - sickness and good health; joys and sorrows; wealth or poverty, or something in the middle, until at last, just as the River Jordan ends its journey in the Dead Sea, so our earthly life ends in death.

The parallel goes on further than the Dead Sea and the end of earthly life. Though its entry to the Dead Sea is the end of the Jordan as a river, it is not the end of the waters of the Jordan. Evaporating under a fierce sun, they return to the skies as water vapour and continue to play their part in God's system. So too with earthly life. Though death appears to be the end, this is not really so; a new life awaits us: we still have a part to play in God's system, God's great plan.

A number of events in Biblical history took place at various points along the River Jordan. But the most significant was the baptism of Jesus. It was the declaration of war on Satan, from which there would be no turning back. Immediately after His baptism, the relationship of Jesus to God the Father was proclaimed: "You are my beloved Son." St. Mark records that the assurance was to Jesus. Matthew and Luke each say that the proclamation was for the benefit of those standing by: "This is my beloved Son." For the first time the Fatherhood of God is proclaimed - that relationship which Jesus was to encourage His disciples to recognise, and which St. Paul took up so strongly. To the Roman Christians he wrote: "When we cry Abba! Father! it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." (8:15)

The proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God was also the proclamation of the arrival of the challenger of all that is evil. The historic ministry of Jesus was about to begin, the battle which would lead to the final conflict on Calvary. As that ministry began, with all the temptation, disputation and discouragement, Jesus was assured of the support of the Holy Spirit, and each writer of the first three Gospels speaks of the Holy Spirit alighting upon Jesus like a dove. Not only was Jesus' relationship to the Father demonstrated, but also to God the Holy Spirit.

It seems a pity that the Gospel passage appointed for today does not go two verses further: "The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." The proclamation had to be proved true. If this was the throwing down of the gauntlet to Satan, that the time of reckoning had come, then it is not surprising that Satan would immediately seek to test the faith of Jesus and His confidence in God the Father, and His reliance upon the strengthening of God the Holy Spirit.

The Church Catechism reminds us that at our baptism we were made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven. At that time our parents and our godparents - or those baptized as adults answered for themselves - that we would renounce all evil, represented by the world, the flesh, and the devil; that we would hold the Christian faith; and that we would keep God's holy will and commandments. Later, at our Confirmation, we undertook these things for ourselves. "I turn to Christ". We became God's children by adoption and grace. Regrettably, we have not always lived up to that high privilege: as our sonship and daughtership is tested we cannot always resist the tempter as did Jesus. We often fail. But failure, as such, is not the crucial thing - what really matters is that we care whether or not we fail. The repentant sinner is always forgiven and able to make a new beginning. Such is the love of God.

The River Jordan, with all its winding, and passing through all manner of country, makes its way inevitably to its goal. So too do we pass inevitably through life, with all its problems and set backs, as well as its joy and gladness. What will sustain us is that which sustained our Lord and Saviour: the assurance that we are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, and the strength provided by the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Year B

11th January 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

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SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year B

18th January 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for today: John 1:43-51] 18th January, 2009

"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." (1:45)

Following His baptism in the River Jordan, Jesus began assembling His disciples. First Andrew and John, until then disciples of John the Baptist; then Andrew brought his brother Simon, renamed Peter by Jesus; then Philip, who passed the word to the sceptical Nathanael as we have heard. So St. John records. But we have a problem here! What about our Lord's 40 days in the Wilderness, being tempted by Satan? To read John's account is to miss that significant occasion altogether. For John records that the calling of those first disciples was the very next day, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke are unanimous in placing the Temptation and those 40 days between the Baptism and the callings. Furthermore, in these other Gospel passages Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee when He came across Simon Peter and Andrew, then James and John, all plying their trade as fishermen. No mention of Philip and Nathanael at that stage.

What to make of all this as we try to piece together these various and varying records? There are of course books and books of learned argument and commentary on these matters, but to go to the nub of it, the scholars tell us that while Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels relatively soon after the Resurrection, Ascension, and that significant Pentecost, John wrote his Gospel much later when he was an old man and had had many years of cogitation about the phenomenon of Jesus. And so he excluded much which the others had recorded, but which to him was irrelevant to his main aim, which he stated towards the end of his Gospel: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." (20:30,31) He tried to go to the very heart of the whole story, and was not too worried about which disciples were called first or whether it was beside the River Jordan or the Sea of Galilee. And as for omitting any reference to the Temptations in the Wilderness, well, he also didn't include the Virgin Birth, the Transfiguration, the Institution of the Eucharist, the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, or the Ascension.

And then there is this chap Nathanael, who appears only in St. John's Gospel and nowhere else. Even then he is mentioned only twice - in this passage with his tremendous statement of discernment: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel!" (v.49) The other incident takes place after the Resurrection, when he was fishing at the Sea of Galilee with several of the disciples, and Jesus appeared and directed them to throw their net on the other side of the boat, and the net was filled with a huge catch. But there is no listing of Nathanael amongst the disciples in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, Instead there is Bartholomew, who is not mentioned by John. It is generally accepted that Bartholomew and Nathanael are one and the same person. "Bartholomew" is a distinguishing second name, for "Bar" means "son of" - and as there were only 12 Apostles, Nathanael Bartholomew must have been one of them.

Because of his statement of faith, we should consider this man': When Philip took him to meet the One who he was convinced was the Messiah, Nathanael was at first sceptical, finding it hard to believe that so great a figure could come from a village like Nazareth. Not that Nazareth had a specially bad reputation, but Cana, Nathanael's home town, and Nazareth were neighbouring villages, and no doubt there was the same rivalry between them as there is between country towns today. As any footy fan would say: can any good player come out of the neighbouring town! Philip wasted no time in argument. He invited his friend to come and meet Jesus for himself. Incidentally, the best method of evangelism - "come with me and see what - or Who - I've found.

It seems odd for Jesus to mention just where He had seen him before Philip brought him - under a fig tree! So? Why did John waste space recording that? For many people in Israel at that time it was the custom to have a fig tree near the door of the cottage, and it, provided a cool and quiet place for sitting and chatting, or in the privacy provided by the spreading and drooping branches one could pray and meditate. In effect Jesus was saying: "Nathanael, I saw you at prayer, in the only private place you have, and there I saw into the secret and private places of your heart, and I know the searching that is there." To Nathanael it seemed an amazing thing that anyone could have the divine power to read the secrets of his heart. He was convinced. "Rabbi!" he said: "you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel!" And Jesus promised him that he would be a witness of the ultimate triumph and glory of the Son of man.

There is not a lot about Nathanael Bartholomew in the Scriptures, but from what we've got we can build up an impressive picture of this man. He was a searcher of the Scriptures and a seeker after truth - the way in which Philip put his announcement is proof of that: "We have found the one Moses wrote about and also the prophets!" The implication being that Philip and Nathanael had spent many hours poring over Holy Scripture searching for information about the Messiah. Because they had sought for truth and studied the Word of God they were able to recognise the Son of God when He appeared.

He was a man of prayer. It was under the fig tree that Jesus saw him, and the implication is that he spent a lot of time there. To his study, he added prayer, and prayer and study added together causes discoveries to be made.

He was a man of complete sincerity. Earlier versions of this passage quote Jesus as calling him "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" In other words, straightforward and genuine. 'At first he was unwilling to believe, but when confronted with the evidence, confronted by Jesus, his prejudices and presuppositions vanished, and he believed. There are those who will not see anything except what they want to see. But Nathanael had that sincerity and openness which enabled him to see the truth even when it contradicted his preconceived ideas.

He was a man with staying power. That could be said about all the apostles, except Judas Iscariot. He was still there with the others even after the agony of the Cross. "You are the King of Israel" he had said. He **still** believed when it seemed that the forces of evil had conquered and the King had found a cross instead of a throne. In one of His post-Resurrection appearances Jesus revealed Himself to a number of the apostles fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and John records that Nathanael of Cana was amongst those present, as I said earlier. His steadfast faith was rewarded, for under the name Bartholomew he is shown to be with those who joyfully returned to the upper room in Jerusalem after Jesus has ascended into heaven from Mount Olivet.

Here we have a man striving to know God; faithful in prayer; completely surrendering himself to his Saviour; and although his subsequent life is clouded in obscurity and myth, he is one of the great heroes of our Faith. We give thanks to God for Nathanael Bartholomew, the Israelite in whom there was no guile. **Amen**

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year B

25th January 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14 & 15)

It is interesting, and rather sad, that when people think about the teachings of Jesus, their first reaction seems to be that He only taught morality and consideration of the needs of others. He taught that of course. But St. Mark places at the forefront of his record, as we heard, that Jesus came to proclaim the imminence, the closeness of the kingdom of God, and of the immediate need for repentance and faithful belief.

According to Mark, Jesus' message is that with His appearance, God is beginning to act in the consummation or fulfilling of the promise of the establishment of His kingdom on earth - the end of the ages, and the Day of Judgement.

The calling of the first disciples at first glance seems unconnected with our Lord's call to repentance, as He began His ministry. And indeed if the Day of the Lord was so close, it seems an unnecessary action by Jesus - the Day must be further off than in His own lifetime, if assistants were to be recruited to continue to preach the gospel.

Repentance, in the way Jesus called people to it, meant, and means far more than a mere being sorry for individual misdemeanors. To Jesus repentance obviously meant a complete reorientation of one's life, of one's attitude towards God. It includes the demand of faith and trust in God. The call of the first disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, is meant to illustrate what it means to repent and believe in the gospel. It does not simply mean to accept certain timeless truths, or to follow a certain code of ethics, but to be attached to the person of Jesus, to go along with Him all the way . to the cross, and through it, to the resurrection. This is the difference between a moralistic understanding of repentance, and the New Testament idea, of turning about, reorientation. The moralistic aspect will undoubtedly follow, as we become aware of our shortcomings and we want to be more like Jesus.

St. Paul, when he wrote to the Church at Corinth, seemed to feel that the expected fulfilling of the Day of the Lord would be any time within the immediate future. "The appointed time," he wrote, "has grown very short". (1 Cor.7:29) And so his comments about single and married life - some of which we heard earlier - must be understood in that context. In the very troubled times expected to surround the fulfilling of the Day of the Lord, Paul sees that it will-be easier for unmarried people to work out their priorities. There are people today who read in the tumult of the Middle East, in the famines and troubles and warfare of our times, an immediate expectation of the ultimate Day of Judgement. And may call at our doors to try and persuade us so. But strangely these folk still go on getting married, having children, staying in their jobs, and even saving their money as if perhaps that Day might not be just yet awhile! In fact Paul revised his expectation later on, as he arranged for an orderly ministry and organisation of the Church. This is not to say that it will not happen,- Jesus Himself said that the Second Coming of the Son of Man will be like it was in the time of Noah - totally unexpectedly, with the people carrying on as normal and not believing that it could happen in their day. We as

Christians are to go on about our everyday lives, but in readiness and in expectation of the fulfillment of the times and the coming of the Son of God in power and glory to judge the living and the dead. We must be ready and expectant at all times.

So we are not to hear St. Paul's message in today's second reading as it appears, literally. People who profess to accept Holy Scripture literally are in a difficult position with such lines as: "Let those who have wives live as though they had none"! Hardly good marriage counselling! It means that within the circumstances of our ordinary lives we are to know and to recognise that the coming of the kingdom of God is at hand, and is beginning to be consummated, for it has already been inaugurated. Our preparation is to repent, to devote our lives to the service of Christ, to follow Him come what may.

The preaching of repentance is a major theme throughout Holy Scripture, and coupled today with our Lord's call, is that of the Book Jonah. The unknown author has based his parable on the person of a prophet who lived in the mid 8th century B.C., and it was published as a protest against the narrow nationalism of the Jews recently returned from exile, about 500 B.C. The story of Jonah's reluctance to answer God's call to go and preach the need for repentance to the people of Nineveh is familiar - how he ran away, but the Lord sent a tempest and the superstitious sailors on the ship threw the hoodoo - the Jonah - overboard to placate the god who was annoyed with them. A great fish swallowed Jonah and eventually he was vomitted out back where he started. The less familiar second part of the story we heard earlier. Jonah is sent off again to Nineveh. He still did not want to go because he was sure God could not possibly care for awful people like them. To Jonah's annoyance the King of Nineveh and his people did listen to his message and did repent and God did exercise compassion.

Jesus spoke of Jonah's ministry to illustrate His own but He claimed that something greater than Jonah was now present. He said: "The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matt.12:14) Not "someone", so we cannot interpret that as meaning He Himself, but "something" - surely the presence of the Kingdom, for Jesus had just said: "The Kingdom of God has come upon you."

The inference we are to draw is obvious Jonah preached repentance to the wicked people of Nineveh, and they turned from their evil ways, and were forgiven. Jesus began His ministry, announcing the Kingdom of God was at hand, and calling upon the people to repent. 'Now that the Kingdom has been announced, and the beginning of the end is at hand, repentance must involve dedication, personal attachment to Christ, and the resolve to serve and follow Him to the cross and beyond. If we hear and obey as did the Ninevites, we too will be saved.

One last word: when Jesus called the fishermen to be His disciples, He detached them from their regular lifestyle and livelihood. They obviously went willingly. For some today, discipleship will mean exactly that. But Jesus did not call all his followers to that kind of service - very few in fact. For most, discipleship means remaining in their ordinary routine of life and its daily organisation and structure. But we are all called to repentance; to a deliberate aligning of ourselves with Christ; to a dedication of ourselves in His service; to faithful worship. **AMEN**