

EPIPHANY 1

“There came a voice from heaven: This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Matt. 3:17

One of the reasons why Christmas is such a popular festival of the church is that we are always fascinated by the idea of human birth. The birth of a new human being is a momentous event.

First there is the physical birth, when the child begins a separate existence from its mother. Suddenly life seems to revolve around this tiny demanding bundle which needs constant attention night and day at both ends. At this stage the new human being is a total receiver of love and affection.

Then as the time passes, the growing child begins to make independent choices and decisions of its own. A new person emerges who is able to give as well as receive love and kindness. There begins to emerge a distinct personality with individual and unique characteristics.

There is a third stage when the individual person becomes open to the Spirit of God. This can be a conscious openness to God in an explicit way, or the person may not be aware that he or she has become open to God, but is so nevertheless. Whichever it is, that person becomes aware that there is more to life than simply the material and the physical dimensions. An awareness of the beauty of a sunset or a fascination with the stars or a love for music and painting. These things are beyond common experiences and have the effect of lifting the spirit – inspiration. This third stage or dimension of human life is described as the Spiritual Life.

All three dimensions are seen in the life of Jesus. The primary event of his physical birth we celebrate at Christmas. As with any child, the Christ child was completely dependent for some considerable time upon his mother.

There is only one event in the New Testament about his adolescence. St. Luke tells us of that occasion when the boy Jesus went missing in Jerusalem and was found after three days in the Temple discussing theology with the elders. Every parent knows something of that hurt which Mary and Joseph shared on that occasion. His individuality was born and he was moving away from them.

His Spiritual birth followed – the awareness of being called by God to be a witness to his love. Before he began his public ministry – before he began to teach others about the kingdom of God – he experienced a dramatic rebirth. In St. Matthew’s words it happened when ‘Jesus arrived at the Jordan from Galilee, and came to John to be baptised by him’. After his baptism Jesus came up out of the water at once, and at that moment heaven opened; he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a voice from heaven was heard saying ‘This is my Beloved, on whom my favour rests.’ This event is recorded in all four gospels – such is the significance of the event in the life of Jesus.

What is the significance in our life? We are not the Christ. We don’t have the distinctiveness of his ministry.

Nevertheless there are two things which I wish to comment upon, and which I think are deeply significant for the church in 2000.

First there is the Baptism of Jesus. In this event Jesus identified himself with normal sinful people. John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance from sin. There is no way in which Jesus needed repentance from sin – he, and he alone, was without sin. Yet he came to John to be baptised by him. This was a powerful lesson in humility. It was probably this event which earned him the title ‘friend of sinners’. It serves as a powerful reminder to us that whatever learning and traditions we might have gained in

being practising Christians and however holy we have become through our years of constant devotion, if ever we lose sight of the fact that we are ordinary sinners then we've blown it. If ever the church becomes a 'holy club' of righteous members, it will cease to be the Christian church.

Secondly, the event says something significant about our baptism – yours and mine. In our living as Christian people we are not acting in our own limited strength, for each one of us has received by baptism the power of the Holy Spirit. It was the same Spirit, which descended upon Jesus himself – that same Holy Spirit is the source of our strength also. This is a power which, if we abuse will be removed, but it is a power which comes from God to equip each one of us to be Christ people to the world around us. This is our Christian ministry.

At the end of our Eucharist we pray 'send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. AMEN.