

Welcome to Epiphanytide, a season of mysteries, revelation, light and joy, in which we recognize the divine glory in Jesus' life and ministry, and in our own. Throughout the season, the voice of the Father is heard: "This is my Son the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." It is an intimate word, full of grace; it is a word of celebration for each one of us who are immersed in Christ's life through our own baptism.

The mysteries of Epiphany are several. We've lived the visit of the magi to the young child, Jesus, understood as the revelation of Christ to the whole Gentile world. At last, the muggles are included in the deep magic! This feast is kept on January 6, so we feel its ripples today.<sup>1</sup>

Later we might observe the sending of apostles, or the wedding at Cana, where the abundant, free-flowing life of God continues to be revealed. Today, we celebrate the central mystery: the manifestation of Christ at his baptism, where the heavens are torn apart<sup>2</sup> and the voice of God is heard; where Christ emerges from the swirling waters of chaos into freedom, a new creation; where heaven and earth kiss, and a humanity fully alive to God is revealed. Into this extraordinary reality you and I are baptised.

We have already entered bodily into this mystery by walking into this building, which – if you use your imagination and turn it upside down – today functions not as a boat, but as an enormous font. You, my friends, are smack-dab in the waters of creation and re-creation, in the awesome wash of Jesus Christ's baptism – this cleansing, consecration, calling, and commissioning. Today we 're-member' ourselves into our baptism.

Christians aren't the only ones who baptise, but ours is the baptism of Genesis: light and dark, wind and water, heaven and earth, the beginning. In the waters we are washed from all that separates us from God, empowered to reject life-sucking evil, and initiated, as we die and rise with Jesus, becoming part of not just an institution, but his body; part of an earth-dwelling community of the divine.

How on earth can a simple ritual capture all this? In the early centuries of Christianity, we would have prepared for months, like baptismal apprentices. On the final night, we would have been taken and hidden away, stripped of our clothing. In the dim light we'd rehearse our new knowledge; we'd sing holy songs; we'd focus, focus, focus in on this momentous decision.

In that other-worldly space, we would make a choice: either to run away screaming, under cover of dark, or to wait, and at dawn to – quite literally – take the plunge into new life, new creation; to burst forth from the Spirit-infused waters and be given a new name, and new clothes to wear.

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<sup>1</sup> See it in action at Matilda Bay today, when our Orthodox cousins plunge into the Swan River.

<sup>2</sup> It is a violent tearing apart; the heavens are 'schizo', says Mark, who uses the same word for the rending of the veil at Jesus' death on the cross.

Of such an experience, Cyril of Jerusalem writes:

“When you went down into the water it was as dark as the night, and you could see nothing; but when you came up out of the water, it was like coming up into the day. That moment was both your death and your birth; that saving water was both your grave and your mother.”<sup>3</sup>

It's a far cry from baptism today, which hardly reeks of danger! Dare we admit that it has been subsumed by our culture, first as a marker of respectability, and now another product on the list of religious goods and services? Frilly frocks and fingers-crossed promises by mildly confused and embarrassed godparents are surely not what wild, passionate John the baptiser and Jesus had in mind. We are talking about an immersion – not just into water – but also into the Spirit of the living God! In some countries people still risk death for this. We take it lightly at our own peril. Like all sacraments of God, it is free and gracious, costly, alien and dangerous.

Baptism – and especially the baptism of our rabbi - is one of our deep magic stories; we revisit them each year, taking time with the telling, allowing ourselves to notice the obvious, delightedly discover the obscure, and somehow engage with the hidden. The self we bring to the story is a little different each time; so too the self we walk away with; each time we have the chance at cleansing, transformation, leaving the old behind.

Perhaps we should come to it naked! Perhaps we should have come in some strange outfit today; our version of camel's hair and a leather belt; come trembling and praying as we see the genesis of our true selves in those waters; pointing with glee and holy fear to the one who has given us life. When we embrace it, the power of this sacrament is inexhaustible.

So, whether your baptism was an unforgettable occasion or a beige affair, you and I have experienced what Gerard Manly Hopkins called the “dearest freshness deep down things”, and we cannot ever be the same, no matter how hard we try.<sup>4</sup> In a world that is bleared and smeared with trade, toil, and Trumpery, remembering that is, in itself, a miracle.

Today, remember: heaven has kissed earth. Hear God's voice and take heart: “My son, my daughter, my beloved: I see you, and in you I am well-pleased.”

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> St Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386)

<sup>4</sup> 'God's Grandeur', Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1877.