

EPIPHANY I January 12, 2020 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the Gospel lesson is always on the Baptism of Our Lord. Like the visit of the Magi from the East, the baptism is a manifestation or revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. And in Epiphany, “the time of unveiling is upon us.” Now we will find out who this Jesus the babe of Bethlehem really is. The story appears in all four Gospel accounts, and Matthew’s has its own particular take on the event. Note here that John is surprised that Jesus is seeking baptism from him, because it had been his expectation that he would seek baptism from Jesus. In fact, he appears to be “horrified” because he seems to have known that “Jesus was the one he was waiting for (so) why then would *he* be coming for baptism?” After all, why would “the sinless one” require a baptism for forgiveness?

In the first place, from John’s perspective, “why would Jesus have let himself be so anonymous? Why did he let himself look like any other mere mortal (and a sinful mortal too)?! Where was the fire, the axe, the razzle-dazzle John had been hopping up and down screaming about for so long now? It’s like John had been predicting Sylvester Stallone but instead Mister Rogers showed up.” In other words, this has everything to do with the kind of Messiah who was expected and the one who actually showed up. And, in a sense, here we have that “mind-boggling mystery of the incarnation. Jesus was a mere mortal. He really was human. He could blend in with the crowd – he did. Yes, we readers have the inside track on knowing he is also God’s beloved Son, but he’s human too --- so human as to share our lot in a sinful world.”

In answering these questions there are a number of possibilities. (1) He is simply being obedient to God, doing all that is required of him. (2) He does so to usher in Christian baptism as opposed to that of John. (3) he does so to identify with sinners, seeking a sign of assurance as they would. Finally, (4) it is only in this way that we can gain a full picture of Jesus, understand his identity, and acknowledge him as the Son of the Father. But perhaps all of these are helpful in answering the basic question: *why?*

The baptism inaugurates the public ministry of Jesus. And it does so in light of the Father’s identification with the Son and his acknowledgement of his love for his own. And it is a public epiphany. As one writer puts it, “he arrives at the Jordan as a humble

candidate for baptism and departs as the heaven-proclaimed Son of God.” In a way, “it is a time of ordination for Jesus --- he receives his anointing.”

But beyond the event itself, “as both God and man, Jesus initiates his public life setting a humble, loving tone that will mark his ministry from miracles to parables, from Cana to Calvary.” The fact that it is a public event suggests that its role in the church will also be as a form of public (rather than private) witness and participation in the mission of Jesus to the world.

The baptism of Jesus the sinless one stands him in solidarity with the repentant ones seeking forgiveness and reassurance from John. They come confessing their sins, and Jesus in standing with them actually effects their salvation. In doing so, he fully identifies with fallen humanity.

We already know how Matthew views these matters. Jesus has come for all of humanity, not simply the people of Israel and not simply for those we would ordinarily view as worthy of consideration by virtue of their presumed respectability by our social standards.

We know Matthew’s views because he begins his narrative with a genealogy in which he includes four women of low repute: one, twice widowed and then the victim of incest when her abusive father-in-law accused her of prostitution; another, a foreigner and a whore who protected Hebrew spies by lying; another, the object of the adulterous passion of King David and participation in a murderous cover-up.

Then Matthew introduces the pagan Magi from Persia, Gentiles come to worship the newborn king of the Jews --- a group of visitors one would not expect to find in such an account. Finally, there is John himself, the son of a priest who fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert and lived a marginal life eschewing the usual *accoutrements* of civilization. So, it is clear that Jesus has come to stand in solidarity with those who are at the margins of society, those who don’t fit in, those who are distanced from respectability by virtue of ethnicity or religion or ritual purity or personal behavioral standards.

Indeed, one prominent scholar declares, he has “come to fulfill God’s plan, the promises which God made ages ago and has not forgotten.... *but if he is going to do all this, this is*

how he must do it: by humbly identifying himself with God's people, by taking their place, sharing their penitence, living their life and ultimately dying their death." This is part of what is being conveyed in this otherwise somewhat puzzling scene.

The unexpected Messiah has arrived. He is not what people had imagined he would be, but in the end in his own way he will amaze and stun the world in this new, surprising form. Our God is a god of surprises, but he is also a faithful God who remembers his covenant with his people and the promises he has made to them over many generations.

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Sources

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