

Last week on the first Sunday of Epiphany we remembered the coming of the Magi, gentiles from far off lands, coming to worship the baby Jesus. Jesus was being made manifest to all the nations on earth. Today is the Second Sunday of the Epiphany and this year in the Church calendar it coincides with the Festival of the Baptism of Christ.

You may know that in The Eastern Church this time of year which we call Epiphany (meaning revelation or manifestation) is usually called something different - Theophany (which means the shining forth and manifestation of God) and the emphasis of the season is not so much on the visitation of the Magi as on the Baptism of Christ by his cousin John in the River Jordan.

And today that's our focus too. We are, of course 30 or so years further on in the story. And we know little about those intervening years. Jesus, we must assume, was living the ordinariness of our own daily lives, outside of the headlines, knowing what it is like to walk in our shoes with the daily challenges joys and sorrows of our day to day lives.

But today we move on to the time when Jesus goes public – when he is revealed, as the Eastern Orthodox Church emphasises in its Theophany liturgy, when he is revealed as the human Messiah of Israel and the divine Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It takes his followers a long time to realise it but it is clear right from the moment of his baptism. The voice from heaven declares: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And these are not just any old words: "You are my Son, the Beloved", echoing Psalm 2 which clearly spoke, for Jews, of the coming Messiah and "... with you I am well pleased", part of the Servant Song from Isaiah 42 which speaks of the kind of Messiah Jesus was to be – not a worldly ruler but a suffering servant.

But we may wonder why Jesus needed to be baptised at all. John, the prophet in the wilderness, was administering a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Baptism was a sign of the washing away of sins following repentance. But isn't Jesus supposed to be perfect, without sin? If so why should he need baptising? This is clearly what John the Baptist thought judging by his reluctance to baptise Jesus. Luke doesn't spell this out, but in Matthew's Gospel we see John the Baptist asking exactly that question. "I need to be baptised by you, and you come to me?" (Matt 3:14). So why did the sinless Son of God come to be baptised?

You may have heard of Corrie Ten boom, made famous by her book and the subsequent film 'The Hiding Place'. She belonged to a Dutch Christian Family. Her grandfather Wilhelm ten Boon started a weekly prayer group in 1844 in the city of Haarlem, near Amsterdam, to pray for the Jewish people. This weekly prayer meeting amazingly continued uninterrupted until 1944 when the ten Boon family was sent to a concentration camp for hiding Jews to save them from the holocaust.

There is an interesting story about her father Caspar ten Boon. When the Jews were forced to wear the "Star of David," Casper lined up for one. He wore it because he wanted to identify himself with the people for whom he and his family had been praying for all those years. He was prepared to be so completely identified with the Jews that he was willing to wear what was seen as a sign of shame and to suffer persecution for the sake of the people he loved. He didn't have to wear the Star but chose to.

In the same way - Jesus does not have to be baptised. But because of his love for us, he is baptised to identify himself with us, just as Caspar Ten Boom put on the yellow star to identify himself with the Jews he loved so much. In his baptism, Jesus *identifies absolutely* with our fallen humanity.

For Jesus his baptism is also, as it is for us, an initiation. Christian baptism is an initiation into the Church, the body of Christ and the family of those who follow him. Jesus' baptism was a public initiation into his ministry, suffering and death.

But perhaps even more than these two, the initiation and the identification, perhaps even more than that it is about the heralding in of a new era, an era about which John speaks when he says: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." For as Jesus rises up from the River Jordan, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit, appearing like a dove, descends upon him with the Father's voice echoing with those words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

John's baptising has been symbolic. But Jesus' baptism goes beyond symbolism to the *power of God*, to the breaking out of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Fire of God. And so it is with Christian baptism too. We believe that the experience is not just symbolic but that it is underwritten by the promised Holy Spirit. We are baptised into the life of the Trinity, Father Son *and* Holy Spirit and when we are baptised we receive the Holy Spirit. It seems that in our reading in Acts that some new disciples had not been baptised in the name of Father, Son *and* Holy Spirit, they had not received the Spirit, and their baptisms were, in that way, incomplete until God used Peter and John to put that right.

When John was preaching and baptising he was pointing forward to the breaking in of the kingdom of God, the messianic age. The old age, characterized by death and corruption is passing away. The old age is about all that must die if the Kingdom is to come in righteousness and joy. The new age is about what happens when the Lord is King, when Christ reigns. So in Jesus, the Kingdom comes and the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, and the lepers are cleansed, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Christian baptism celebrates our incorporation into the new age, into the new world, and marks the beginning of a life-long transformation, the work of the Holy Spirit in each of us.

It's pretty radical stuff. The trouble is that we sometimes forget how radical it is, take it a bit for granted, get a bit too comfortable and complacent.

At the start of this New Year, as we remember Christ's baptism, it's good to remember our own baptism too, a baptism in which God takes hold of us and grafts us into his family forever. And rather than making some new resolution to try harder or to do better, instead, why not open ourselves afresh to the Holy Spirit, open ourselves to that refining and transforming fire of his love. Open ourselves to hear the words we scarcely dare to believe: 'you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter'.

We need reminders, even of the things that are important to us. A few days ago I received a photo book of pictures of our recent trip to Uganda (and I'm relieved it arrived just before Jessops went into administration this week). It is a physical reminder that I can touch and hold to remember those exciting few weeks and how God was powerfully at work in them.

So too we need reminders of our Baptism. Some people intentionally remember their baptism when they choose to cross themselves. But there's another physical reminder that can help us recall our baptism, that we are adopted into the family of God and that we are beloved sons and daughters: the baptismal font. It has been traditional in churches for the font to be placed at the West end, deliberately so that the congregation passes it on the way in.

Many of us, Sunday by Sunday, enter this building by the west door and walk past the font. Even those who enter by other doors usually pass the font at some point when going to check our pigeon holes. Why not make a point of remembering your own baptism as you approach the font. Let it remind you that you have been given the Spirit of holiness and of power; let it assure you that those words are true, the words once said to Jesus himself: 'You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter'. And so let it inspire you to work and pray for the Kingdom. And let it be a sign, a reminder, a celebration, that in Christ the old age is passing away - the new age, the new world is here - and we were enlisted and commissioned in our baptism to be agents of it, until the Kingdom of God comes in fullness and Christ is all in all.