

## A Happy and Blessed Timkat!

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 12 January 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the first Sunday after the Epiphany of the Lord were Isaiah 42:1-9 and St Matthew 3:13-17*

If we were in Ethiopia right now we would be preparing to wish each other a happy and blessed Timkat. No, not a happy and blessed tomcat: *Timkat*.

What on earth is Timkat? It could be the name of the family's pet feline. But it's not. Timkat is actually an important religious festival in Ethiopia.

Each year, in mid-January, the 40 million plus members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church go in for a wild orgy of celebration. The three-day festival brings most of the country to a screeching halt. People pray and sing. They feast and exchange gifts. Processions process all over the place. There's lots of noise. Pageantry abounds.

Timkat is Christmas on steroids.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which traces its origins back to apostolic times, thus marks what most other churches call the Epiphany of the Lord. In the western churches we observe the Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>. But as we're all still hung over from Christmas and the New Year, it is a much more subdued occasion.

So subdued as to be almost invisible. Which is unfortunate. OK, Epiphany is a strange word for most of us. It sounds archaic. But what it stands for matters. English stole the term from Greek. It means a shining forth, a deep realisation, a process by which something important that has hitherto been hidden makes itself apparent.

Last Sunday I spoke of the God we've never seen, the hiddenness of the Eternal. Respecting the divine mystery is important. But God's hiddenness is only part of the story. Sometimes mysteries do reveal themselves. There are moments, cherished moments, when quite suddenly hidden things become clear.

Imagine you're driving in the Swiss Alps. It is snowing. You can see nothing but the fog in front of your lights. Suddenly the snow stops, the clouds lift, the sun shines

through and – wah! --there, right in front of you, is the most stunning mountain scenery in the world. It was there all along, of course, but now what was hidden is revealed. An epiphany! Or, you're a scientist who's been laboring away on a problem for years with no result. Suddenly the answer appears. Eureka, you've found it! The mystery has broken open. An epiphany!

Or perhaps you are looking at a baby in a cattle barn in Bethlehem. No big deal, just one more kid in a world that's full of them. But then it hits you. The significance of that new life dawns on you. This child is special, really special. Here is the one so long awaited. Here is the divine mystery, revealing itself to humanity's poor blind eyes. Here is the ultimate epiphany, beyond all others!

The bible story with which Epiphany is most closely associated is the journey of the wise men. We sang about them in our opening hymn. They were astrologers, seen in those days as the wisest of the wise. They had followed their star from places far distant to pay homage to the Christ child. In them, the best of the world's wisdom falls upon its knees before something, someone, who is recognizably divine.

On the Sundays that follow 6<sup>th</sup> January, the gospel readings in the Church's lectionary continue the theme, recalling other epiphany moments in the life of our Lord. This morning, for example, we heard again of the dramatic events surrounding Jesus' baptism.

It was a religious ritual of renewal, representing cleansing from sin and the restoration to a right relationship with God. Jesus sought baptism from John, who had been preaching widely and was baptizing many. "You?" says John, recognizing his pre-eminence. "No dice. I should be seeking baptism from you". "Yes me," insists Jesus. What happens next has two dimensions, and the combination of the two is highly significant.

First, John caves in and Jesus is indeed baptized—lined up with the rest of the crowd, just like everyone else. An act of solidarity. The moment proclaims, to all people in all times and places: this guy is one of us. Mark that.

Of course, the Church has always taught that Christ is both human and divine. Some of the fiercest arguments of the early church took place as our spiritual ancestors tried to work out how to express this seemingly impossible combination. But for all the effort put into theological fine-tuning, for all the care the Church has taken in stating its belief in the dual natures of Christ, his divinity usually tends to come out on top. And all too often his humanity gets short-changed.

Most religious art – St Stephen’s stained glass, for example – portrays Jesus as a rather other-worldly figure, complete with haloes, crowns, enormous authority, a faraway look in his eyes, angelic garb and a remarkable capacity for quelling storms and walking on water. Whatever else he may be, he doesn’t seem much like one of us.

Whenever artists have tried to portray his humanity, the result is usually outrage. Popular piety is shocked. In 1926, for example, the German artist Max Ernst painted “The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Christ Child”. Mary is shown spanking Jesus for some misdemeanor. To make sure everyone gets the message, her halo is in place over her head while her son’s has fallen to the ground. When that picture saw daylight, all hell broke loose. People could not cope with the idea that Jesus might have been a child like other children.

In our time, film is the visual art that has done most to provoke Christians into a deeper appreciation of Christ’s humanity. And that has not been without controversy either.

Some of you will recall the movie that was based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ controversial novel “The Last Temptation of Christ”. Some 25 years ago, it was about to begin showing in Sydney. Many Christians – plus, interestingly, quite a few Muslims – contacted the Australian Council of Churches, wanting us to demand that the film be banned. There was even a phone call from someone who told me she had nothing to do with any church, but she wanted it banned too!

I resisted that pressure, for four reasons. First, censorship has an unhappy history; it should be invoked only with great care. Second, if you haven’t seen a work of

art you're in no position to have an opinion about it. Third, if an artistic portrayal really is destructive to faith, you'd be crazy to give it free publicity by kicking up a fuss. Fourth – and this is the real point – Christians believe in Christ's humanity, so how could we argue that a film is blasphemous merely because it portrays the man wrestling with our very human dilemmas?

Jesus of Nazareth is not God *pretending* to be one of us. He's not God in disguise. That cry of despair "My God, why have you forsaken me?" is no act. Either the incarnation is for real or it is a fraud. The man Jesus, lining up with the crowd for baptism, is just that – a man. In truth, completely, every bit and forever, one of us.

But he is also something more.

The gospel account, you will remember, pulls out all the stops. What happens as Jesus emerges from the water? The heavens open. The spirit of God descends upon him. There is an echo of the prophet Isaiah's ancient yearning that we heard in today's first lesson. The divine voice thunders from heaven "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased".

It sounds like pure Hollywood. And, in a way, it is. The drama conveys something mere words cannot.

In Jesus' baptism, we see that the man who is one with us is also one with God. Eternity is touching time. Heaven is touching earth. The mystery is breaking open. The one so long awaited is here. Recognition occurs. It's a moment of epiphany – again.

And what does that baptism lead to? A life of servanthood, that's what. A journey for God and for others. Which, if you think about it, is what every baptism should lead to, ours included.

Of course, like all festivals, Epiphany starts and then, inevitably, stops. But what it stands for, thank God, goes on.

Still today, there are moments when life's vast, mystifying silence is broken. For a few among us, such moments are frequent, illuminating, energizing, life-changing. Some do seem to have a special gift for living in the presence of God.

Most of us, however, most of the time, don't. Hearing or reading of such saints, we feel a vague mixture of envy and inadequacy. In their company we are spiritual also-rans, almost non-starters. For us ordinary mortals, mini-epiphanies, moments of insight, are rare.

Yet there are such moments. Even when the very word "God" sounds like the echo of a long-forgotten language. Even when we get ourselves into our worst tangles. Even when we feel as if we're wandering in utter darkness. Even then, perhaps even especially then, there may be precious moments of deepened awareness, when the fog lifts, the light shines through, the mystery reveals itself, the meaning of it all is glimpsed and – wah! – though perhaps through a glass darkly, we begin to see.

It happened then. It happens now.

May God give us eyes to glimpse, faith to discern and lives ready to respond to these mini-epiphanies, these special moments of grace and insight, with which our lives, still, are blessed.

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