

# When the Mystery Breaks Open

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 9 January 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the first Sunday after the Epiphany of the Lord were Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43, St Matthew 3:13-17*

This is festival time for Sydney. And it's festival time, too, for the Church. First we had Christmas. Then, just twelve days later, on January 6, the Epiphany of the Lord.

"The what?" I hear you cry. Yes, "Epiphany" is a strange word, at least for us who have been shaped by the western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) traditions of Christianity. Eastern (Orthodox) Christians are much more familiar with the festival. Indeed, for most Orthodox churches, the Epiphany eclipses Christmas.

But come back to the word. Years ago, when I was keeping a sceptical distance from the Christian faith, I used to wonder why Church people were so hooked on using obscure language. "Atonement?" "Trinity?" "Transfiguration?" "Epiphany?" Why did Christians seem determined to sound like refugees from another age, if not another planet?

Scrap the quaint language, if you feel you must. But don't scrap what it stands for. Those strange words, and others like them, are keys that together help us get at the time-tested treasure of the gospel.

So what does "Epiphany" stand for? English stole the word from the Greeks. It means a shining forth, a deep realisation, a process by which something important hitherto hidden makes itself plain. Hongkongers have a very useful expression for such moments of epiphany: Wah!

You're driving in the Swiss Alps through snow, seeing 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 has been

revealed. An epiphany! Or, you're a scientist who's been laboring away on a problem for years with no result, when suddenly – wah! -- the answer appears. Eureka, you've found it! The mystery has broken open. An epiphany!

Or, you're 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 is made known to you. This child is special, really special. Wah! 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 this festival is most closely associated is the journey of the three astrologers from the east – the wisest of the wise, following their star from the ends of the earth to pay homage to the Christ child. The best of the world's wisdom falls upon its knees before – wah! – something, someone, 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 "mini-epiphanies" in the life of our Lord. This morning, for example, we heard again of the dramatic moment of 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. 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 walking on water. Whatever else he may be, he certainly doesn’t look much like one of us.

When artists have tried to portray his humanity, the result is usually popular outrage. In 1926, the German artist Max Ernst painted “The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child” – and among the faithful, unable to cope with the idea that Jesus had been a child like other kids, all hell broke loose.

Some of you will recall the film based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ controversial novel “The Last Temptation of Christ”. Just over 20 years ago, the movie was due to begin showing in Sydney. Many Christians – plus, interestingly, quite a few Muslims – contacted the Australian Council of Churches, wanting us to demand the film be banned. I resisted the request, 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 some very human dilemmas?

Jesus of Nazareth is not God *pretending* to be one of us. His cry of despair “My God, why have you forsaken me?” is no act. The incarnation is for real or it’s a fraud. This guy, lining up with the crowd for baptism, is 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. A voice is heard from heaven declaring “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. Wah! Epiphany -- again!

Festival time for Sydney. Festival time for the Church. Epiphany, the festival, starts and stops. But, thank God, what it represents goes on.

For still today, and every day, even when we get ourselves into our worst tangles, even when we wander in utter darkness, there are moments when God speaks. Rare moments, perhaps. But real nevertheless. 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! – albeit through a glass darkly, we begin to see.

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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