

SERMON – PASTOR GREG
8.1.2023

EPIPHANY. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate two events in the life of Jesus Christ: the revelation of God's love to the nations and the revelation of God's being to the world. Let us pray.

In the late 18 C an English folk Christmas song became popular and it is still popular today: 'On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me...'. Most of us know the song but have you ever wondered what the '12 days of Christmas' relates to? It celebrates the Christmas season which is the twelve days from 25th December to the 6th of January.

Immediately after his Resurrection and Ascension, the disciples of Jesus Christ started to gather on the Lord's Day- the day after the Sabbath- Sunday- to celebrate his resurrection (Acts 2:42). Sunday became the key day of worship for Christians. Then came the annual celebrations of Easter and of Pentecost (Acts 2). Then came the day of Epiphany- the 6th of January which had a three-fold focus: The Incarnation of the Son of God, the Coming of the Magi and the Baptism of Jesus. The celebration of Epiphany began in the 2C. Still today in the Eastern Orthodox churches, Epiphany is second only to Easter. It was only in the 4C that Christmas became what it is today.

Epiphany, like Christmas, primarily affirms the Incarnation of the Son of God- born to the Virgin Mary as prophesied in the OT. Born to die so that we might be born again of water and the Spirit to live forever with God.

Epiphany also reveals the love of God for all people. The coming of the Magi with their gifts revealed to all who would receive the good news that God wanted and wants all people to hear and believe, to repent and receive and to be turned away from hell and put on the righteous path to heaven. In Micah 4 we hear: *In the last day the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; It will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it.* Gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh- possibly signifying Jesus as King, Priest and Sacrifice. Three gifts which gave rise to the popular idea of three wise men. And the traditional nativity scene which only became popular in the 13 C by Francis of Assisi shows the three wise men/kings at the birth of Christ. Most probably they came a little later. But the key confession of Epiphany or Manifestation of God's glory -is that foreigners- those outside of the Covenant- were worshipping Jesus Christ. In doing so, they represent all those were not of the Jewish faith but who would believe in Jesus as the Messiah. But Herod and in time, the Sadducees and the Pharisees and many other descendants of Abraham are those who refused to believe. In the Gospel of John, we hear this tragic reality: *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.* Epiphany proclaims to us that God loves all people and that He commands all people to repent and to trust in His Eternal Son as the Way of Salvation- and the only Way.

Epiphany also reveals God's very being. January the 6th is the date of Epiphany and the end of the Christmas season. But the Sunday immediately after Epiphany celebrates the **baptism of Jesus**: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice from said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

In John 3 Jesus told Nicodemus that *"Unless you are born again of water and the Spirit, no one can enter the Kingdom of God."* Jesus, in the Great Commission commands his church to make disciples of all nations through baptism, teaching and obedience. Romans 6 proclaims the wonderful gift that baptism is. As does 1 Peter 3:20: *In (the Ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* Why is baptism so important? The second article of the Augsburg Confession speaks of the sinful nature that we have inherited from Adam and Eve as does Eph 2: *Lie the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.* Born with a sinful, selfish nature we need to be born again and be given a new heart and a new spirit.

But not Jesus. Born of the Virgin Mary, tempted in every way as we are yet he was without sin (Hebrews 4:14). So why did he say to John that it was necessary for him to be baptised? *To fulfil all righteousness.* Firstly, as an example to all human beings- that he – who was without sin- allowed himself to be humbled and baptised- how much more for us- who are sinners. But to fulfil all righteousness- what is this? In the Gospel of Matthew righteousness deals with God who alone is righteous and the demand by God for us to also be righteous. To be righteous is to be like God and to be in a right and proper relationship; with Him. But this is what we cannot do. But the Son of God could and did- he has fulfilled all that is demanded of us- he has fulfilled all the commands of God and all the prophecies of God and he lived the obedient life. Jesus and Jesus alone is our righteousness. In him we are brought into a right and proper relationship with God and declared righteous.

But Jesus' baptism also reveals the very being of God. Jesus is baptised. As he comes up out of the water the Spirit of God comes upon him. And the voice God the Father speaks. *This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.* Here we have the Epiphany of the Blessed Holy Trinity- God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit- Three Persons but One God. A mystery revealed but still a mystery.

Today we celebrate Epiphany- the manifestation of God's love for you. And we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ and remember that his baptism is our baptism- today God again says to you: *You are my (child) whom I love. With you I am well pleased. Amen.*