

THE FIRST REVELATION OF THE TRINITY

Isaiah 43. 1-7

Acts 8. 14-17

Luke 3. 15-17, 21-22

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The word Epiphany (as we saw last week) means ‘the act of *appearing*’; and Epiphanytide lasts for another month. During that time, we will hear scripture readings that describe those episodes in the life of our Lord when God’s glory was especially *apparent*.

The episode that we consider today is that of Jesus’s baptism by John in the Jordan River. It marks the beginning of Christ’s public life as it is recorded in the gospel of Luke.

Compared to the descriptions of our Lord’s baptism in the other gospels, it can be said that Luke’s account seems rather telegraphic, and almost anti-climactic. Luke simply writes (and I paraphrase), ‘all the people were baptised, and then Jesus was baptised also.’ You would think that the two men would have had rather more to say to one another. If they did, Luke doesn’t record it.

However, what happens in that ritual act of baptism was something of epochal importance. As soon as John had baptised Jesus, plunging him down into the river and then bringing him back up again, something incredible happened: the heavens were torn open and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. And those who were present at the scene (alongside us, the readers of Luke’s account) got to overhear a bit of divine communication: one person of the Trinity speaking to another. ‘A

voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

When those events happened, it is fair to say that a new age began. The heavens were torn open; the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ; and the voice of the Father was heard. We must not let the familiarity of the story mitigate its power. In that moment of baptism, for the first time in history, the Trinity was made manifest on earth. The Holy Spirit descended from the open heavens, and the Father spoke, naming our Lord as his Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: they are all present in that one moment.

Now, articulating the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity with any specificity is a very difficult task, and I am not going to attempt to do that today. But at the most basic level, the Christian belief is that the Holy Trinity is three divine persons who are mutually indwelling and intimate; and this all happens in some mysterious way in light inaccessible, hidden from our eyes; in an eternity that is outside of time; in a place that is outside of geography.

Yet at the moment of our Lord’s baptism, described so succinctly today by Luke, the inaccessible light becomes *accessible to us*, because the eternal Trinity enters into history. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are there: present, both unified and differentiated, in the shallow end of the river Jordan. The heavens open; the Father speaks of his Son; and the Spirit descends: what these three things have in common is that they show us that with Jesus, the line between heaven and earth has been erased. The most fundamental boundary of all—that between Creator and creation—has been crossed. Not just by an emissary from God such as a visiting angel or an other-worldly messenger; no, the boundary has been crossed by the Trinitarian God himself, and not just a ‘part’ of God or a symbol of God.

This event shows that there is now commerce between heaven and earth; that there will now be interaction, even physical interaction, between the eternal Creator and his temporally-bounded creation. What is naturally impossible in the everyday course of things has become real.

This breaking-in, in just these terms, had been the cry of the prophet Isaiah, when he asked God to ‘tear open the heavens’ and to ‘come down’ (Isaiah 64. 1). Come down, Isaiah pleaded, in order to establish justice; come down, he begged, to set the captives free; come down, he cried, to reconcile the world to God. Here, at the very beginning of the public life of Christ, the gospel writer wants it to be clear that this is exactly what has happened. Isaiah’s deepest wish has been fulfilled. At our Lord’s baptism, the heavens are rent open and God has come down into time, in robust Trinitarian fulness.

This is the baptism that we celebrate on the Second Sunday of Epiphany: the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Trinity was made manifest.

In spite of this world-changing revelation of the Holy Trinity, some of us may still wonder why Christ had to be baptised in the first place by John. John the Baptist was a wild man out in the wilderness, as if in self-imposed exile from civilisation, preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And why would our Lord, who was sinless, ever need to be baptised? Although he needed no repentance or forgiveness from sin, by his baptism Jesus took a public step in which he *identified himself* with humanity’s sin and failure, and his willingness to become our substitute.¹ In a way, Christ’s baptism was his first step toward Calvary.

¹ Cf. 2 Cor 5. 21.

But as we close, there is one last thing that today's account of the baptism of our Lord reveals to us. I think that Luke's gospel both affirms the full Trinitarian divinity of Jesus and shows the extent to which he embraced his humility.

Note that this baptism at the hands of John is not a moment of strength for Christ. It is no exercise of his divine power. Rather than our Lord commencing his public life with a mighty act of his own, it begins instead with a passive act, one in which he has something done *to him*, rather than he doing something himself.

John the Baptist lowers Jesus into the water and brings him back out again, and for a moment there Christ is totally vulnerable, at the mercy of the wild man clothed with camel's hair. Whatever else our Lord's baptism is about, it is also about this: it is one instance of Jesus's willingness to enter into the lives of everyday human beings; to share in their experiences, even when they are not of necessity his own; and this, in order to most completely be the Word made flesh who dwelt among us and lived among us.

In Luke's gospel account of the baptism of Christ, we simultaneously see the power of the eternal Trinity and the vulnerability of our Lord; the weakness and the strength; the temporal and the eternal. All of this is revealed by the Messiah for whom Isaiah longed; by the King of the Jews whom the Magi adored; by the one who was conceived by the Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is the beloved Son, who invites us and brings us into that holy community, the Trinitarian family of love.

Amen.