

**Sunday 9 January 2022**  
**Holy Trinity – Holy Communion**  
**Epiphany 1**

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

So, here we are, only the second week of Epiphany and Christmas already seems like an age away.

Epiphany - comes from a Greek word, and is generally taken to mean "appearing" or "revealing."

During this brief season between Christmas and Lent, we leave shepherds, mangers and swaddling clothes behind us, and we now turn to stories of dazzling revelation.

For Epiphany itself it was Wise Men and stars.

This week we have doves and voices.

If you come next week as well you'll get water and wine.

In the Celtic tradition of Christianity, Epiphany stories are stories of what are often called "thin places".

These are places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes almost permeable. God pulls back the curtain, and we catch glimpses of his love, his majesty, and his power.

Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our world, and discover the extraordinary.

Epiphany calls us to look deeply at Jesus, and see God.

But, there's a problem here, isn't there?

How many of us can say that they've discovered a portentous star rising in the East.

How many of us can say that they've seen the Spirit descend like a dove, or heard a divine voice in the clouds.

How many of us have watched water become wine, or seen Jesus's clothes blaze white on a mountaintop.

I suppose that many of us have professed belief in a self-revealing God for most of our lives, but how many of us have experienced him in any of the ways the Epiphany stories describe.

Are we just a people who walk in darkness?

Our experience might be unique, but I doubt it.

I don't know many 21st century Christians who bask in signs and wonders, who complain that God talks too much, or that he butts into their lives far too often.

But I know plenty of believers who experience God as hidden and silent. These are faithful people who long for epiphany — not just for a season, but for lifetimes.

So where does that leave us?

Imagine that you are standing at the edge of the river which is in this week's Gospel reading - Luke's account of Jesus's baptism - how many of us would be afraid to leap in?

How can we bridge the gap between an ancient voice and a modern silence? Heaven opened.

A dove descended.

God spoke.

Really?

We want to believe this.

We do.

But to accept the supernatural in Scripture is to plunge into a sea of hard questions.

If God spoke audibly in the past, why doesn't he do so now?

If he does, why haven't we heard him?

Is God angry with us?

Has he retreated?

Changed?

Left?

Or, are the ancient stories of Epiphany simply figurative?

Was the dove, in fact, just a dove, and the voice from heaven no more than a nicely timed windstorm?

When we speak of epiphanies, are we really just wallowing in metaphor?

When did you last hear someone say...

I had a "spiritual experience."

I felt "God."

He "spoke" to me.

The trouble is that it feels like it has almost become embarrassing to believe in miracles.

The early church had this same problem with embarrassment as well. For them the story of Jesus' baptism was an acute embarrassment, but for reasons very different from our modern ones.

What scandalised the Gospel writers was not the miraculous, but the ordinary. Doves and voices?... that was all well and good — but the Messiah placing himself under the teaching of a rabble-rouser like John?

God's incarnate Son receiving a baptism of repentance? Perfect, untouchable Jesus?

What was he doing in that murky, dirty water, alongside all the great unwashed?

And why did God the Father choose that sordid moment to part the clouds and call his Son beloved?

I suppose every age has its signature difficulties with faith.

When we're not busy flattening miracle into mirage, we're busy instead turning sacrament into scandal. After all, what's most incredulous about this story of Jesus' baptism?

That the Holy Spirit became a bird?

That Jesus threw his reputation aside to get dunked alongside sinners?

Or that God looked down at the very start of his Son's ministry and called him Beloved, well before Jesus had accomplished anything you could say was worth praising?

Let me ask the question differently...

What do we find most impossible to believe for our own lives?

That God appears by means so familiar that we often miss him?

That our own baptisms bind us to all of humanity — not in theory, but actually in the flesh — such that we are all brother and sister, responsible for each other in ways we all too often fail to honour?

Or that we are God's Beloved — not because we've done anything to earn it, but because our Father has spoken?

Here's our real problem with Epiphany:

we always, always have a choice — and most of the time, we don't want it. We expect God's revelations to bowl us over.

We expect the thin places to dominate our landscape, such that we're left choice-less, powerless, sinless. Freed of all doubts, and pulsing with faith.

But no... God allows us to choose.

No matter how many times God shows up, we're free to ignore him.

No matter how often he calls us beloved, we can choose self-loathing instead.

No matter how many times we think about our baptism, we're capable of dredging out of the water the very sludge we first threw in.

No matter how often we reaffirm our vow to seek and serve Christ, we're at liberty to reject him and walk away.

What reason is there for hope, then?

What shall we hang onto in this uncertain season of light and shadow?

I know this isn't a particularly easy time... the anti-climax after Christmas, the lull before Lent.

But it could just be that it's us and not God who is the problem.

Just because we can't see God, just because we can't hear him, doesn't mean he isn't there.

Maybe we've stopped looking,

maybe we've stopped listening,  
maybe even we're praying so hard God can't get a word in edgeways.

I believe that Jesus himself is our thin place.  
He's the one who opens the barrier, and shows us the God we long for.  
He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance, and pain — all so that we might hear the only voice that can tell us who we are and whose we are.

Take time to listen to that voice that says...  
We are God's own.  
We are God's children.  
We are God's pleasure.  
Even in the deepest water, we are the Beloved.

As we heard in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we are created by God for his glory, and that's why he chooses to redeem us.  
Not because we're worthy but because, inexplicably, he loves us so much.  
A truth worth holding on to for any time of the year.

Amen.