

EPIPHANY

Epiphany is one of the most overlooked seasons of the Church's Year. The excitements of Christmas are over, the decorations are taken down, and the return to everyday life and work in cold weather can seem austere. Yet the messages of Epiphany, if we will receive them, are rich in meaning and symbolism.

Three wonders mark this holy day: today a star led wise men to the crib; today wine was made from water at the wedding-feast; today Jesus came to John to be baptised in the River Jordan, so that he might save us. Alleluia!

This ancient Roman antiphon reminds us of the threefold significance of Epiphany. The word 'epiphany' comes from the Greek *epiphaneia* meaning manifestation. In the Western Church we have often tended to think of Epiphany as being simply the manifestation of Christ to the wise men, forgetting Christ's baptism and first miracle, which between them mark the start of his earthly ministry. The Eastern Church never lost this vision of Epiphany; in the fourth-century Epiphany ranked with Easter and Pentecost as one of the three principal festivals of the year.

Today a star led wise men to the crib

The scene is so familiar as almost not to need introduction. The wise men (traditionally three in number) have travelled far; the infant Christ's reception of their offerings underlines the fact that he has come to save all peoples of all races – a point that will be emphasised again at the end of the season, when Simeon hails Christ as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'. Three members of the congregation – possibly but not necessarily children – may bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the crib, their offering followed by reading, music and prayer.

And whether it is the custom of an individual church or not, surely on this occasion the burning of incense is appropriate. In Germany, the custom is for children to process around the parish and to mark doors in chalk with G + M + B, † 08 (Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, followed by the year), reminding us that years are numbered in terms of Christ's salvation).

Today Jesus came to John to be baptised

The Sunday following January 6th is the feast of the Baptism of Christ. Christ submits himself to John's ministry, yet the start of his own ministry is affirmed by the descent of the Spirit 'like a dove' and a voice from heaven 'You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. We are reminded powerfully that our baptism is an experience we share with Jesus, and of vows we made or which were made for us at the time; and we reflect on the significance of an occasion which we may well be unable to remember. Whether or not there is a baptism at the principal service this day (and it is good if there is) we can renew our vows, with the font as a principal liturgical focus.

Today wine was made from water

The wedding at Cana in Galilee saw the first of the many miracles which marked Christ's earthly ministry. The symbolism is deep and thought-provoking; not only is something special made out of something everyday, but there are foreshadowings of the Last Supper, the shedding of blood for our salvation and of the heavenly feast. So Christ's first miracle looks directly forward to his full, final sacrifice. The emphasis is on the supernatural breaking in on to the natural and on the centrality of the Eucharist in our own spiritual development.

One of the Sundays of Epiphany will

concentrate on this event (though special provision is made if 6th January falls on a Sunday or Monday in Year A). The offertory procession, prefaced by careful and relevant preaching, may become a particular focus.

? Could we make more of the different ways Jesus was revealed through Epiphany?

Other themes

Epiphanytide includes the Conversion of Paul (25th January), preceded by the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18th -25th January), both of which (like the stories of the wise men and of Simeon) emphasise that Christ's salvation is for all races. Mission and unity are important facets of the season: mission to the world outside the Church since Christ died for all, and unity within the Church which was Christ's valedictory prayer.

Candlemas

The climax of the season is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also known as the Feast of the Purification of Mary the Virgin but also increasingly as Candlemas. The infant Jesus is presented in the Temple forty days after his birth; Anna and Simeon recognise him as the Messiah, the promised, long-awaited one. Whether or not it is the local custom to light candles, a blaze of candlelight will symbolise this day simply yet richly; and the crib – which should stay in position throughout Epiphany – will be the focus of the end of the service, ending our celebration of Christ's incarnation, and emphasising that the weeks from Advent to Candlemas form one story.

? How could we use visual symbols like candles and Incense during Epiphany?

What holds the season together?

The timeline of Epiphany is potentially confusing; between Bethlehem and Cana or the Jordan we jump forward thirty years, only to return to Christ's infancy at Candlemas. Within this span occurs also Christ's visit to Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old boy, an event which does not mark the end of his parents' authority over him but does signal a turning-point in his awareness of his relationship to God the Father and of his own mission. So it is helpful to see Epiphany not only as a sequence of events, each one with its own message, but as a complete illustration of the nature of Christ's Incarnation and of the nature of his ministry – a ministry we shall start to study in the shorter or longer period of Ordinary Time which follows and which then leads us with Christ into the wilderness as Lent arrives.

Liturgy

Colours - as is fitting for the radiant nature of the season the Feasts of Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ and Candlemas may be Gold or White; the rest of the season is White.

Readings - those for 6th January are common to Years A, B and C. On the following Sunday all Years celebrate the Baptism of Christ; other Sundays pursue different aspects of the season and of the nature of discipleship. There is ample scope in each Sunday's readings for imaginative, rich preaching.

Music - the Western Church's long emphasis on the Bethlehem aspect of Epiphany means it is easier to find hymns and choral music on the wise men than on other themes; the Baptism of Christ and the wedding at Cana are poorly served. We still need new settings of the

relevant texts and new, imaginative texts to enhance these events. The resources leaflet gives details of several publications which will help in choosing music for the season.

- ?** Could those who lead our worship explore some recently written hymns, e.g. on the themes of mission and baptism, to expand our Epiphany repertoire?

Visual art - for many centuries, Bible stories have provided inspiration for painters, and (like music) visual art can often transcend mere words with the insights it conveys. Some images will appeal chiefly to adults, some more directly to children; the greatest will have messages for all ages. Our artistic inheritance has much to teach us; its use in public worship, as an aid to preaching and in its own right, should not be undervalued. Illustrations of the principal events of the season of Epiphany are plentiful, and easily found on the web.

All-age possibilities - the stories of Epiphany offer many openings:

- Epiphany itself gives the chance to finish off the traditional nativity story with the visit of the wise men.
- Some churches hold a special service for The Baptism of Christ and send invitations to families whose children have been baptised during the past year: to celebrate that baptism, and to reconnect with the promises that were made.
- Candlemas is also a good opportunity to emphasise the welcome given to children - maybe they could be linked up with Simeons and Annas, older members of the church who will undertake to pray for them?
- Epiphany can be a good time for Christingle services - not so busy as before Christmas.

The Christian Year



Epiphany

This is one of a series of leaflets written by Durham Diocesan Liturgical Committee and copyright © Durham Diocesan Liturgical Committee 2008.

The leaflets may be freely photocopied for parish use, but may not be sold.