

Well Christmas is officially over for another year. 12th night has passed by. How does the song go? 10 Lords a leaping, 11 pipers piping, and 12 drummers drumming. Imagine what they would do to your front lawn.

But seriously, the 6th of January was Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek “epiphaneia” which means disclosure or unveiling, and it refers principally to the revealing of the Christ child to the Magi as the light of the world and the king of all nations, Jew, and Gentile alike. In our church calendar Epiphany is also a four-week season and the Bible readings in the Lectionary during that season remind us of the various occasions when the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ was revealed to various groups of people of his time.

Today's lesson tells us of the revelation of Jesus to John the Baptist as the Son of God at His baptism. Let me give you context to our reading. There has not been a prophetic word from God since the Old Testament prophet Malachi. 400 years have passed. Spiritually speaking the nation of Israel was living in a wilderness of unbelief and the roads to spiritual reality were twisted and in disrepair. The priesthood was corrupt, and the legalistic hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees had weakened the nation spiritually. The people desperately needed to hear a voice from God John was dispatched. Suddenly a wild man appears in the desert, John the Baptist a voice crying in the wilderness, a herald who goes before God's king, God's Messiah. His job was to make sure the spiritual way was ready for the King. John preached a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins.

This was something new. Jews did not get baptised. That rite was reserved for Gentiles converting to Judaism. It was a sign to the world, I was an outsider but I'm renouncing my old lifestyle and embracing faith in the one true God, Jehovah, the Lord God Almighty. People of the day must have been amazed that so many Jews were responding to his preaching, and his call to repentance, and water baptism. By doing so, they were admitting that their race, their Jewishness alone did not guarantee them a right standing before God. They acknowledged their need to personally repent of their sins and profess hope in God for their forgiveness. But this baptism was not to be an empty ritual or empty gesture. Their repentance had to be authentic: evidenced by a change of heart, turning away from their current lifestyle, and a determination to lead a holy life. John told them this meant sharing with those less fortunate. Tax collectors and soldiers were to give up exploitation and corrupt practises. The people's water baptism was a seal of their repentance – an outward expression of an inner change in attitude.

The people really responded to John's preaching, so much so, that they and the church hierarchy began to wonder if John might possibly be the Christ. But John strongly repudiated such notions. John 1v 20 “He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Christ.” And in today's lesson v16 “John answered them all, I baptise you with water but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John knew his baptism was an interim one because it couldn't deal with sin and the penalty for sinfulness. It also relied on people being motivated by an act of human will to change their ways. Anyone who has tried to keep a New Year resolution knows human will can only take you so far. So, it seems odd that Jesus submitted himself to water baptism by John. Jesus was sinless. He had no sin to repent or be cleansed from. Luke doesn't tell us the reason. He gives us the bare facts, but amazing facts. Jesus was baptised, he prayed, the Holy Spirit descended on him and God the father himself proclaims Jesus as His son and declares His favour on Jesus. “With you I am well pleased.” (Literally: I am always pleased with you.)

This was John's epiphany. John 1v29 “Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. And 1v34 “I have seen, and I testify this is the son of God.” Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry and separation from his old life in Nazareth: his carpentry, his family. God now totally orders

his life. He also leaves an example for his disciples to follow. Matt.28v19 “Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We can still ask, why water baptism? Like Luke, Mark and John have nothing to say on this matter but other scriptures reveal that Jesus was baptised in obedience to God the Father and to identify completely with sinful humanity, to take upon himself mankind’s condition and predicament because of sin. Matt.3v13 “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. 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. (Right standing with God). 2nd Cor. 5v21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

He became our perfect substitute because he was sinless and needed no repentance or cleansing from sin. In Jesus, all God’s requirements for all righteousness are met. Jesus didn’t come to heal the sick, to perform miracles, to shake up the religious establishment of the day, or to set you and me a good example of how to live our lives. He came to deal with sin. Once for all. It was through his baptism of suffering on the cross that Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. His water baptism is a picture of his work of redemption. It’s a picture of his death, burial, and resurrection. At this point it would be easy to get side-tracked into a discussion about the form and efficacy of the baptismal rite: infant baptism and confirmation vs believers’ baptism, sprinkling vs dunking.

Suffice it to say I have my views. I have no idea if I was baptised as an infant. I was baptised by total immersion in 1961, age 11. There then followed a sorry dissolute life. When I came back to faith, I was confirmed in Saint John’s on 14th of March 2010. Michael Ogilby was also confirmed at that service. On the 5th of May 2018 Sophie and I renewed our baptismal vows in the river Jordan. If we return to Jesus’ baptism, it’s a preview of what happens when Jesus became sin for us. The scene encapsulates our salvation journey.

When we submit to Christ, receive him as our Saviour immersion portrays our repentance, turning our backs on sin, dying to sin and the rising from the waters signifies our rising to new life in Christ with our sins forgiven and to a new life directed and empowered through baptism of the Holy Spirit. For a Christian then baptism with water, however you want to go about it, should be an outward symbol of an inner reality. The inner reality is that when we come to faith in Christ our sins are forgiven through his death on the cross and the inner reality of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It’s the Holy Spirit that brings us into a close union with Jesus despite his physical absence. We are a new creation. We have a new nature, a spiritual nature, which expresses itself in new concerns and interests. Concerns with the things of God: His word, His people, His service, His glory, His Kingdom, and more than anything else God himself. It’s the Spirit that guides enables and encourages us. It’s the Spirit that empowers us to resist sin and obey God’s command to love one another. It’s the Spirit that equips us through the giving of spiritual and supernatural gifts to serve in and build up His church. In summary the indwelling of the Spirit leads us to Christlikeness.

That journey of faith, like any journey has its with ups and downs. Gal.5v17 “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict, with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” So, even the most mature of Christians must remain vigilant, and beware an over-confidence that their old sinful nature has been totally dealt with.

This is a true story. My colleague in the USS was called out to investigate an explosion in the Holy Land involving one of our students. It transpired this music student was tasked with making his own musical instrument. He decided on a steel drum and procured an old petrol can from a local mechanic. He rinsed out the drum and was confident he had dealt with any risks. He then set about cutting the

bottom off the drum with his own angle grinder. Despite his confidence, the drum was empty of liquid, but not vapour. The inevitable explosion occurred. He was a truly fortunate young man. He lost his eyebrows, singed his hair, and blew out the window in his backyard. I'm sure he caused his neighbours no little consternation.

Since we can't completely empty ourselves of our old nature, it's not surprising that Paul wrote to the emerging churches, and to us today, warning us to keep in step with the Spirit, to live according to the Spirit, not to grieve the Spirit or quench the Spirit's fire.

How can we grieve the Spirit and endanger our anointing by Him? By not surrendering every aspect of our lives to Jesus. By not being tender hearted to one another, by mistreating, being rude, disrespectful, thoughtless, and insensitive to others. Paul says in Eph.4v31 and 32, "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you. What are the danger signs of losing the Spirit's anointing? Loss of a sense of peace in our souls. Inability to forgive past hurts, feeling guilty about previously confessed sins. Doubting God's forgiveness in Christ. Prayer life becomes a struggle and God's word seems difficult to comprehend. Is all lost? No. Paul in Eph.5v15 "Be filled with the Spirit." (Literally the Greek says, "Be filled continually with the Spirit.") How do I do that? Luke 11v13, "If you then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. So simply ask Him. Pray for a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit every day. Pray for forgiveness for those areas of your life that you have not surrendered to Christ. Pray for forgiveness for those things in your life that have grieved the Holy Spirit. Maybe you're not sure what to pray, what words to use.

I was reading the Passion Translation of the New Testament and the Lord's prayer in Luke 11v2, in between the phrases "hallowed be your name and your Kingdom come" it states the earliest Greek manuscripts have "may your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us." Alternatively pray part of the Collect for Purity from our Holy Communion celebration and personalise it, "Cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration (breathing in) of your Holy Spirit that I may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name through Christ my Lord. Amen. Whatever. Pray, pray, and pray some more for a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit. So, as we finish, through John the Baptist's epiphany, Jesus has been revealed to us as the son of God, the baptiser in the Holy Spirit, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

In this part of the world, "No Surrender is a common refrain. If you are considering making a New Year Resolution, consider resolving to surrender everything to this Jesus. Happy New Year.