

## Baptism of Christ/Epiphany 2

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

*Isaiah 43.1-7, Acts 8.14-17, Luke 3.15ff*

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*You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased.*

There is much excitement among physicists and astronomers: like a blind prophet, the observatory atop Cerro Pachon in the Chilean Andes, although eyeless for now, will in a year or two become the biggest digital camera ever made: the LSST *Large Synoptic Survey Telescope* will map the skies of the entire southern hemisphere like never before. And: this is what the excitement is about – it (along with its sister [*Dark Energy Spectroscopic Instrument DESI*] in Arizona) will apparently shed light on the clash of forces, a celestial tug-of-war, which have brought the universe to its current state. On one side of the contest is gravity – based on Einstein’s theory of relativity: the theory was that the attractive effects of gravity was gradually slowing down the universe’s expansion. Then astronomers decided that in fact the opposite was true – that the universe is still expanding, and at a faster clip than before. And the excitement is in trying to discover the as-yet-unidentified, dark matter or dark energy they call it, which apparently is counteracting gravity. I only know all this because of reading erudite articles in *The Economist*<sup>1</sup> and from Janet’s nephew, a high-powered physicist working in Germany: though whenever he tries to explain any detail about all this, I’m afraid that I have absolutely no idea what he’s going on about.

I say all this because: what an amazing and mysterious and scary and beautiful creation our wonderful God has created. This beautiful Blue Planet which we inhabit, so much of its wonders still being discovered. David Attenborough, what an extraordinary person he is – has helped bring this to our attention over the years. And this mysterious and powerful creator God: what we mark and celebrate in this shining season of Christmas-Epiphany is this God humbling himself, to enter this world, born as love, born in the manger. As one writer puts it: “In the outstretched arms of the Christ-child, God offers [his] love to us, tentatively, humbly, generously. God’s gift of

love has no strings attached, makes no demands, imposes no burdens. Freely given, it can be freely received”<sup>2</sup>. We, you and I, can accept his gift of love, simply by opening our hearts and saying in our minds, ‘Yes, Lord Jesus.’

God has created the universe for love, and longs to share his love with us and all those he has created. The love of God is present in the world in the very created order. But it is also wonderfully and uniquely focused in his Son Jesus Christ who shows us – by his very being, by his deeds, by his words and by his sacrifice on the cross – the amazing extent of God’s love.

In this season of Epiphanying (*meaning literally showing out*) we’re called to reflect on the revelation of this love of God in Christ. The Church gives us, for our contemplation, three stages in this manifestation, this showing out. The first stage is the visit of the Wise Men – we marked it last week. All but the *marginal people* largely ignore Jesus’ birth. It’s people who belong to a very different culture, people from a far distant country, who see the star and come to worship. They fall down and present gifts with a meaning: gold for the King of the Universe; frankincense for the great High Priest; myrrh for the sacrificial Victim.

The second stage of the epiphanying of Christ is the Baptism of our Lord in the river Jordan by John: that’s what we remember particularly today: when a voice is heard from heaven saying, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ At this stage, some of John’s disciples take an interest in Jesus and he begins to attract some disciples of his own.

The third stage of the manifestation/epiphanying of Christ is the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee – we will hear it read next week, when Mary, the mother of Jesus, says to her Son, ‘They have no wine.’ [John 2: 3] Jesus turns the water into wine: the old ritual of the people of Israel is transformed into the new wine of the free gift of God’s love. Now his disciples really take him seriously. John reports the result of this first of Jesus’ seven signs (of which the last will be

the crucifixion itself), 'Jesus revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' [John 2: 11]

Well, that's all very well, but what about us? Despite these revelations, these manifestations, so significant in the history of civilization and the development of our culture, so many people in our generation turn their back on God's love revealed in Christ, or pass by on the other side. If we have come to see, as far as we can in this life, through a glass darkly, we should ask ourselves what are the means *by which other people* can come to see. Two thoughts:

First, individually. As individuals, we too have been baptised, as Jesus was. Our baptism joins us to him in that continuity of revelation, of the proclamation of justice and love, compassion and healing. Those words '*You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased*' are addressed, we pray, to you and me. That should make us think: think about the kind of people we are: whether we really do seek the grace of God to make him present in our own lives. That's not about joining the latest bandwagon to do good, important though it is to relieve poverty and end oppression. This is about the hard inner soul-searching which roots out greed and pride and arrogance, which acknowledges and works to eliminate (in ourselves first) anger, anxiety, selfishness and laziness – and all the other shortcomings, of which we can all think, which somehow make us less than the people we could be, the people we are created to be, the people we are baptised to be. *You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased*'

And then secondly, what about the corporate dimension to all this – for the Church of England and for our Cathedral family and ministry? As a church, both as the universal church and as the part of that 'church catholic' which is the Church of England, we forget our past at our peril. Like it or not, we are the body of Christ for the working out of the will of God in *this* time and *this* place. Being the church is not about imposing our view of things, however excellent they may be. It is about discerning that golden thread – or, perhaps, many threads – by which the will of God is known across time and place – and being ourselves part of that thread, something that will

enable generations as yet unborn to look at our time and know 'that God was here'.

It is us who bear an awesome responsibility to make that happen. That is the burden and the joy of those who are set apart through ordination to sacred ministry. And it is also the joy and privilege of all God's faithful people to share in the responsibility of spreading the good news of God's love. If we fail, you and I, to tell the Good News about Jesus to the very people with whom he came to share the gift of God, we are all, to some degree or another, culpable, responsible.

So – this wonderful, awesome God – who created the beautiful earth, who created the beautiful diversity of races and peoples and cultures, who created the galaxies and the expanding universe: this awesome God humbles himself to come among us, is baptized by John, gives **us** grace and faith and love, calls **us** to join with him and all the baptized to bring that love to a confused and hurting world.

This shining season of Epiphany offers us an opportunity to renew our baptism commitment, to receive afresh the grace and power of God through his Word and in his Sacraments, so that we can more effectively share his love with others. It all began when the shepherds and the Wise Men fell down and worshipped.

For us too it begins with worship. In our worship we offer the gift of the bread and wine and receive the inexpressible gift of the Body and Blood of the Lord. We offer our praise and thanksgiving. We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies. Nothing less than that is worthy of the great gift we have received. Nothing less than that will prepare us for the worship of heaven, our ultimate calling and our destiny. That voice from heaven: may that be addressed to us too as we seek to be the people God would have us be:

*You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased.*

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<sup>1</sup>'The Economist 5 Jan 19, 'Dark energy and cosmology'

<sup>2</sup>Gerd Theissen, 'Traces of Light' SCM Press.