

Epiphany 1

A baby is born. Family and friends gather round on tiptoe to see the new arrival. When the mother walks out for the first time, passers-by, complete strangers stop to have a look, sometimes standing entranced for minutes at a time, lost in admiration. What is more natural than wanting to show and wanting to see a new human being? There it is—the potential for a whole lifetime of experiences and achievements, the energy that will pulse through 60, 70, 80, or 90 years of life, the germs of ideas, visions, and equations to come, all packed into this tiny red bundle of fragile flesh. What power! What vulnerability! What a miracle!

And this, basically, is the starting-point of the season we call ‘Epiphany’, beginning with the Feast of the Epiphany itself on January 6th, when the Church remembers Mary ‘showing off’ *her* new born baby to the wise men from the East and, through them, showing to the world the power, the vulnerability and the miracle of this word made flesh. And with each Sunday that follows this first ‘epiphany’—a word that simply means ‘showing’ or ‘manifestation’—we explore further moments in which the power, the vulnerability, and the miracle of Christ’s life are shown or, to put it in churchy language, ‘revealed’ to the world. Today we are invited to consider how, through the figure of the descending dove, he is shown to John and to us to be the one chosen, elevated, and loved by God as the Son in whom He is well-pleased. Yet this, like each of the subsequent epiphanies does no more than repeat the essential movement of the mother showing her child to the world. All we have to do is to look and see.

And this makes preaching in epiphany especially difficult, since, of all the seasons in the Church’s year, this is the one in which words seem least relevant. If the invitation is simply to look and see, then surely the best thing for us to do is to stop talking as soon as possible and to start looking. But it is one thing to look and something else again to see. Jesus himself, quoting Isaiah, spoke of those who look and look and do not see and sometimes even the act of looking can get in the way of really seeing. How so?

Because, as in the epiphany of Christ's baptism, what we are to see here is not just the scene that might have been captured by a camera or a mobile phone, not the scene painted or sculpted or filmed in so many brilliant and insightful ways by artists of very diverse approaches and methods. What we are to see is the revelation of the Spirit.

Of course, the baptism of Jesus by John was an event that occurred at a particular place and a particular time. Had we been there, we could have taken a photograph, 'captured' the image, or, if we had the ability, gone home and painted what we had seen. And perhaps the picture we would have produced would have been very beautiful, even inspiring, as the outward manifestations of religion often can be beautiful and inspiring—as much in the simplicity of a wilderness baptism as in the high masses of great cathedrals and chapels. But would our picture have shown the spirit? Showing it to our friends, we could easily enough point out the main features—that's the river Jordan, that's John, that one there is Jesus, the one being baptized—and there's the dove that suddenly appeared fluttering down from out of the clear blue sky. And we might go on to talk about the crowds standing round, waiting their turn, or the Pharisees and Sadducees standing critically to one side, perhaps even pointing out some feature of the landscape that especially caught our eye. If what we had produced was a genuinely artistic image, perhaps we could meditate on it for many hours, letting each detail, each configuration of colour, line, and tone sink into our visual memory.

And if it was a truly great artistic image, perhaps critics could expound and debate its meaning for many centuries to come, identifying references to various aspects of Christian doctrine, to the biblical text or cross-references to other great works of art. But would we have been able to show the spirit? Could any image show the spirit? For, the spirit is not only something that essentially eludes all words and concepts, speaking only in sighs and groans too deep for words, surely it is also essentially invisible. Scripture describes the spirit descending like a dove and later, at the start of the book of Acts, at Pentecost, we are told about the tongues of fire that hovered over the heads of the disciples. But surely we know that doves and tongues of fire are and can be no more than ways of imagining what has no image? Isn't the spirit precisely that which, by definition, has no definition? Where, then, can we look to see *the spirit*?

Of course, the Christian answer is, at one level, obvious. We look to Jesus, to Jesus as the Christ, and in him, in his flesh, his life showed to the world we see the spirit. Yes—but that merely restates the problem, since we can, of course, look at him and see ‘just a man’, a historical personality—just as we can look at this moment of his baptism and see nothing but a picture. Looking is not enough—we must also be able to **see**. It is the difference between the baptism of water—John’s baptism—and the baptism of spirit—Christ’s baptism. So how, then, are we to look so as really to see, to look so as to see the spirit?

Our first reading from Genesis offers a clue in talking about the spirit’s presence in the earliest movement of creation, ‘sweeping over the face of the waters’. To see the spirit, we do not need to set about cultivating extraordinary gifts or talent or becoming ‘spiritual’ people in any artificial or fanciful sense. To see the spirit, we do not need a third eye, we need only to start seeing the world for what it is and as it is, seeing our own humanity for what it is and as it is. Life doesn’t need to be made ‘spiritual’, life is spirit, the source and gift of spirit—if only we could see it with divine eyes. In the end, Christian spirituality is neither more no less than reality training: seeing how things really are, what life really is. And that is why there is perhaps no smarter way of introducing the theme of epiphany than the image of a mother showing her child to the world, for even the most hardened of men may, for a moment, stop and see again the miracle and the sacredness of life—the spirit—in the struggling limbs or soft sleep of a new-born child. As Chinese Taoist philosophy teaches, ‘He who is in harmony with the Tao is like a newborn child. Its bones are soft, its muscles are weak, but its grip is powerful. It can scream its head off all day, yet it never becomes hoarse, so complete is its harmony’.

Jesus Christ, emerging from the Jordan, dripping wet and lifting his eyes to see the spirit, like a dove descending, shows us such a life. Behold the man! Behold the Spirit! What power!

What vulnerability! What a miracle!