

SERMON, ST JOHNS EPIPHANY

The Orthodox Church celebrates the Feast of the Epiphany with boundless joy and exuberance – indeed, with greater enthusiasm than Christmas, believing that it predates the celebration of the birth of Christ. While in the West, we celebrate on this feast the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan and the changing of water into wine at Cana in Galilee, in the East, Epiphany is the feast of lights, the illumination and sanctification of the world through the revelation of the Holy Trinity made manifest in Christ's baptism. "Today," the priest proclaims, "the hour of our festival has come, and the choir of Saints assists with us, and Angels celebrate together with men. Today, the clouds refresh mankind by raining down righteousness from heaven. Today, we are redeemed from darkness and illuminated by the light of the knowledge of God...Jordan was driven back when it saw the fire of the Godhead descending in bodily form and resting upon it." These words are joyously proclaimed at the blessing of the waters for baptism, which the faithful also take home to bless their houses for the coming year. The priest continues, "When thou, O Lord, was baptized in Jordan the worship of the Trinity was manifested. The voice of the Father bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His Beloved Son; and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the immutability of the words. Thou hast appeared, O Christ our God, and hast illuminated all the world; glory to Thee."

In fact, there are two blessings of the waters in Orthodox tradition, one is on the eve of Epiphany in the church, when, using a simple bowl for the occasion, the priest dips the cross into the water three times symbolically "baptizing it." The other, considerably more dramatic, blessing takes place outside in a natural body of water that stands for the River Jordan. After Divine Liturgy, a "Crucession," a procession with the cross, goes to the body of water where the priest casts the cross into the water and the young men of the community dive in enthusiastically to retrieve it. The man who brings the cross back to the priest receives a special blessing for himself and his household for the following year. This tradition, of course, works well in warm climates such as Greece or in the large Greek community of Tarpon Springs, Florida, where up to 40,000 people gather for the joyous occasion. In Russia, the Orthodox are content with crucecressing to a frozen lake, cutting a hole in the ice and dunking the cross three times.

Epiphany is a beautiful word with roots in the Classical Greek and Roman traditions. It literally means "manifestation," or "shining out" and is closely related to an equally exquisite word, "Theophany," which means the appearance of the divine or of a divine being. In the Iliad and the Odyssey, the gods frequently manifest themselves to mortals and even fight on different sides in the Trojan War. In the Aeneid, Aeneas' divine mother Venus comes to his aid at Carthage in the disguise of a huntress and only as she departs does the hero have that "Aha!" moment of recognition. Though Christianity's roots are in Judaism, because the vast majority of the early Christians were, in fact, from Greco-Roman origins, the early Christian experience of Jesus was similar to the "Aha!" occasions associated with epiphanies or theophanies of the old gods. It was largely in retrospect that they questioned, "What is it about this amazing man who

so transformed our lives and the very world in which we live?” Surely this was the very presence of God: this infant at Bethlehem, this young man baptized in the Jordan, who taught us the way of God, this man who was crucified and yet we experience him alive and who continues eternally to reveal himself present in the breaking of the bread. “Aha!!” When we consider the full implications of Epiphany, then the whole life of Jesus is both an epiphany and a theophany, a stunning manifestation of the eternal divine in the midst of our world. The events that we commemorate in this season: the coming of the Magi, the Baptism, the Transfiguration and the Wedding at Cana, are all signs of the enlightenment of our world through the coming of Christ. Orthodox Christians would call this the “divinization” of the whole created order by virtue of Christ’s Incarnation.

Years ago in London, I had the joyous experience of attending the Russian festival of Epiphany. Archbishop Anthony of Sourozh, an Orthodox monk and bishop who was one of my revered spiritual teachers, presided at the blessing of the waters, whereby he solemnly dipped a magnificent Byzantine cross three times in a great silver bowl. That day, he preached the best sermon on both Epiphany and Incarnation I’ve ever heard. I might add here that in some Eastern Christian traditions, such as the Armenians, there is no distinction at all between Epiphany and Christmas, our great feast of Incarnation. Archbishop Anthony told us that day that water, as the source of life, represents in Orthodox tradition the whole created order. Jesus’ submersion in the waters of the River Jordan signify the Incarnation, God taking on flesh, entering fully into our humanity, saturated in all that it means to be earthly – God as man living **our** life, suffering **our** pain, dying **our** death. As Jesus rose out of the Jordan, the waters of the river clung to his body, symbolically demonstrating that by virtue of his Resurrection and Ascension, the whole created order is brought into the Divine. This, by the way, is the meaning of the Festival of Ascension at the end of the 40 days of Easter. Ancient Christians called it the Queen of all festivals because it represents the culmination of the whole Christian story: the joining of earth to heaven and the divinization of all things. Indeed, St. Athanasius, primary author of the Nicene Creed, boldly wrote in his great work on the Incarnation, “God became man, so that man might become God.” Wow! This is nothing less than the full consequence and meaning of this great festival of Epiphany: if God is made manifest in Jesus, if God shines out through him, then God shines out through all creation and even through the likes of us.

So, this is why I often say that Epiphany is when the “rubber” of Christmas actually hits the road. What does it mean that God is Incarnate in practical terms? How can you and I treat one another as if we **really** believe that if Jesus is the epiphany of the divine, then we also see God reflected in the faces of our sisters and brothers, in the faces of those we don’t like, in our own faces? How might we consider the universal meaning of those stunning words of God at the baptism of Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased?” Should we not apply them to one another, to our own selves: “You are my Daughter, the Beloved, You are my Son, the Beloved?” How differently might we treat this beautiful earth, God’s sacred creation, if we truly believe that it is divinized, beloved? How can we not simply celebrate Epiphany, but actually **be** the Epiphany of God in all we say and do? My fondest wish when I am dead and gone is that one soul on this earth will remember that on at least one occasion I was such a vehicle of grace and love that I was to them an Epiphany of God. I earnestly pray for just one “Aha!” when I die! Don’t you?

