

## “The Heavens Were Opened”

### Isa 64:1-4

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

### Luke 3:15-18, 21-22.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

### Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

## Sermon:

We are beginning the season of Epiphany in the liturgical calendar; it is a word that means “manifestation” or a “striking appearance”. In the Western Church, Epiphany is associated with the visit of the wise men to see the Christ child and present their gifts, thereby revealing that Jesus is the saviour of the *whole* world. In the Eastern Church, however, Epiphany is linked to the baptism of Jesus, and the divine acclamation that follows announces the intimate relationship between God the Father and the beloved only Son – as we just heard from Luke’s gospel. I want us to explore this passage briefly together, since it is today’s lectionary reading. Being an occasional preacher, I usually follow the traditional lectionary readings; they cover about 75% of the Bible in a 3-year cycle. It also stops preachers speaking on their hobby horses and forces us to be faithful to scripture, even when it

is a challenging text. Today's reading not only teaches us more about the identity of Jesus, but it speaks of how to face new beginnings, and this is most appropriate at this time of New Year and of new school terms.

There was a heightened sense of spiritual thirst in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine because the people had long been under oppression from the Romans - and the Greek Empire before them. They wanted a political saviour, someone who would put their world to right and restore Israel to its former glory. We find the same attitude at times of elections today, and – of we are honest - in our individual lives too! Earlier in Luke we read that John the Baptist was challenging the people to repent because God's justice was at hand. The crowds, being filled with messianic expectations, asked John what they should therefore *do* to get ready. In Luke's account, John responds with a message of social justice. The people are told to share their possessions with those in need and deal fairly each other - and his message to those in leadership is to promote justice and fairness. The people wondered whether John himself was the long-awaited "Messiah", a Hebrew word that is translated "Christ" in Greek. John the Baptist is emphatic: no, he is not the Messiah, but God's Anointed One *is* coming and he will baptise "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." In John's mind, the fire was the fire of judgement. But judgement is good news when forgiveness and repentance is at hand because the primary aim is to *save* the wheat, *not* to burn the chaff.

Luke gives no details on the baptism of Jesus; he mentions it only *after* he announces that John the Baptist has been put in prison by King Herod. For Luke, the baptism of Jesus signifies the end of John's ministry as "a voice crying out in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord", as the prophet Isaiah puts it. We then read that after Jesus had been baptised, and while *praying*, "The heavens were opened", and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying "you are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". Let's unpack this epiphany, this "striking divine appearance", together.

First, Luke emphasises the *prayer life* of Jesus in his gospel. Whenever Jesus is about to make a major decision or shift the emphasis in his ministry, he first prays. We read in the Book of Acts, Luke's 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, that the apostles follow Jesus' example and devote themselves to prayer (1:14). Since Epiphany is celebrated at the beginning of a new year, this is a timely reminder for us to pray for the year ahead. For it is through prayer that we begin our partnership with God. Prayer is a dynamic expression of our relationship with God and his commitment to us.

Second, the passage – in apocalyptic tones - tells us that "the heavens were opened". As we heard in our reading from Isaiah 64, the prophets of old *longed* for the heavens to be opened. The spirit of God had been deemed to have left the people for centuries. In saying "the heavens were opened", Luke is announcing a *new* age of God's communication and activity with the whole world, so fulfilling Israel's expectations. More specifically, that God is manifestly present in the life and work of Jesus, God's Anointed One. Luke is the only gospel writer to articulate that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in

*bodily form*, like a dove.<sup>1</sup> The use of “bodily form” perhaps stresses the reality of this event and has parallels with the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus Christ we read of later in his gospel. Something unequivocally happened in this *manifestation* of the presence of God. In this Epiphany, *God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, commissions and empowers Jesus to begin his ministry on earth.*

Third, a voice from heaven says “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We hear similar words at Jesus’ Transfiguration in Luke 9. In this acclamation there is an emphasis on the intimate relationship between Jesus and God the Father. Note, Jesus has *done* nothing yet in his ministry; nevertheless God proclaims that “with you I am well pleased.” This divine affirmation at Jesus’ baptism demonstrates that the Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Spirit - are all on the same mission and working together in unity.

While I believe firmly that Trinitarian insight, we need to pause for a moment. The doctrine of the deity of Jesus was not finalised in the Church until 325 AD at the Council of Nicaea. This means that in early Church thinking, the deity of Christ didn’t simply leap out of the gospel pages in the way that we usually see them today. Furthermore, even though the seeds of the Trinity are manifest here Christ’s baptism (and in John’s gospel and elsewhere), the doctrine of Trinity was not established until 385 AD, after centuries of deliberation and debate.

So what might Luke be emphasising to his 1<sup>st</sup> century readers? I suggest his main thrust was not to establish the divinity of Jesus, but to proclaim him as the long-awaited Messiah. The Jews were certainly not expecting God’s *son*, as such, but a Messiah – a saviour! The Hebrew prayer that was, and still is, said daily by all religious Jews begins “Hear, O Israel the LORD our God is one.” This affirms the strict monotheism of Judaism. So for Luke to be announcing Jesus as God’s *son* would be seen instantly as blasphemous by all Jews. But a Messiah, God’s Special Anointed One prophesied of old, would be welcome gospel or “good news”.

So, you could ask, what might Luke’s Jewish readers have understood by the heavenly proclamation: “you are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”? Devout Jews would likely have recalled Isaiah 42:1 – “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” That being the case, this epiphany points to a fulfillment of prophecy. But the voice from heaven also echoes the words from a kingly coronation in Psalm 2:7: “You are my son; today I have become your father.” This, if I can say it without seeming irreverent, sounds like Darth Vader addressing Luke Skywalker! The psalmist’s poetic symbolism is often understood as God *adopting* a special king as his son, and hence Luke may be alluding to Jesus being a messianic *King*, in the footsteps of the great King David.

Some of you might find this way of looking at the text alarming - and I suspect Luke would appreciate that fact. Let me try and explain briefly why. Mark’s gospel was the first to be written and it begins

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, there are no other references in the Old Testament to the God’s spirit being linked with a dove, which today we all identify as a symbol of the Holy Spirit and of peace.

with the baptism of Jesus, rather than his birth. Consequently, there may have been some confusion in Luke's day that Jesus only became God's adopted Son at his baptism. Matthew and Luke were aware of Mark's gospel when they wrote their accounts, and both of them add birth narratives which inform the reader exactly who Jesus is. Earlier in Luke's gospel we hear the angel Gabriel telling Mary that Jesus "will be called son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-3). The angels also announced to the shepherds that a saviour "is born in the city of David, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (2:11). And the devout and aged Simeon affirmed through the Holy Spirit that he could now die in peace having seen the baby Jesus, the Messiah, who would be a light to the Gentiles and God's salvation for all (2:29-32). Both Matthew and Luke make it abundantly clear that Jesus was divine from conception and not a status bestowed on him at his baptism. And John's gospel begins by identifying Jesus with the everlasting divine *word*, the *logos*, language that is rich in symbolism for both Jews and Greeks. So we see Luke and Matthew retell Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, including the divine affirmation, and at the same time their birth narratives remove any confusion that might have arisen in terms of divine adoption.

Why go on about this, you may wonder? Because in Paul's letters he speaks of us Christians becoming *adopted* into God's family - into the body of Christ - through baptism. And we must also remember that most - if not all - of Paul's letters were written before the gospel accounts, and were widely circulated. It is true that, like Jesus, we are also loved by God before we have done anything. As followers of Jesus, whether we were baptised as children or as adults, God's love and God's forgiveness is unmerited generosity and grace. But Jesus remains unique; he was not literally or symbolically *adopted* into God's family like a Davidic king, or like us through our baptism.

As I stated earlier, more immediate Jewish concerns at *that* time was Messiahship. And Luke tells us that Jesus *is* indeed the Messiah and he comes to bring good news of forgiveness, restoration, and peace with each other, with creation, and with God. In Chapter 4 Luke spells out Jesus' ministry in his first sermon. Quoting Isaiah 61, Jesus says "The *Spirit of the Lord is upon me*, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" - a time of renewal and restoration, rather than judgement.

Incidentally, the book of Acts also begins with the birth narrative - the story of the birth of the church. We are told that Christ's followers meet regularly together for prayer. It is in that context the Holy Spirit comes and fills them *all* with power and boldness, commissioning *them* for *their* new ministry, one that follows in Christ's own footsteps. Luke's mention of a violent wind and tongues of flame mean that the prophesied coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled beyond a doubt, as the rest of the book demonstrates.

New beginnings, high expectations, hope of new and better things. This is how January begins. We often start by beating ourselves up with New Year's resolutions and a renewed guilt-filled

determination to try even harder. Such efforts don't usually last very long. Luke presents a very different model of new beginnings for Jesus and the early Church. They start with *prayer* and move forwards in the *power of the Holy Spirit*. I suggest that is how we should begin too.

At the beginning of this year, let us remember the meaning of Epiphany, God's striking appearance at Jesus' baptism. Remember too that we have been adopted into God's family in baptism; we are his beloved children. We have also been given the same Life-giving Holy Spirit. God calls us to be refilled, to be continually dependent on him; to be excited, full of anticipation for the good things that we will do together within our families, our worlds of work and friendships, and in our church and city. And in all we will do, we co-partner with God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the authority of Jesus, the Messiah, who has commissioned us to spread his good news. Let us *begin* with prayer.