

## **Sunday 5 January 2025 - Epiphany and Baptism – Michael Bayley**

*Epiphany is the festival observed on 6 January in the church calendar in commemoration of the coming of the Magi, presented as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the Western Christian tradition. This Sunday, the day before Epiphany, we were also to celebrate a baptism, but a heavy downfall of snow prevented it from taking place in the service itself. Michael Bayley preached his sermon 'virtually' from home, linking the first reading to the twin themes of epiphany and baptism.*

### **Readings:**

Ephesians, 3: 1-12; Matthew, 2: 1-12.

### **Sermon: Epiphany and Baptism – Michael Bayley**

New Year. New hopes or new fears? How do we grapple with the multiple threats that seem to endanger what we hold precious? What hopes can we have for the New Year.

How is this for an invitation? It comes from Oriah Mountain Dreamer, a Canadian Indian Elder. It is entitled 'The Invitation'.

“It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.  
I want to know what you ache for,  
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.  
It doesn't interest me how old you are.  
I want to know if you will risk  
looking like a fool for love, for dreams, for the adventure of being alive.  
It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring with your moon.  
I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow,  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals,  
or have become shrivelled and closed for fear of further pain.  
I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,  
without moving to hide it, or fade it, or fix it.  
I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own,  
if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you  
to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful or realistic  
or to remember the limitations of being human.  
I want to know if you can be faithful, and therefore trustworthy...  
I want to know if you can get up after a night of grief and despair,  
weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children...  
I want to know if you if you still stand in the centre of the fire with me  
and not shrink back.”

As an invitation to hope it sparkles, but it leaves me with a question. How do I, how do we lay hold of that quality of life? I don't think 'lay hold of it' is the right word. It is a gift. It is a gift which may be given in many ways but there is one rite which makes it absolutely clear that it is a gift. That is baptism.

Baptism is about gift. It is about grace. It is about the way God recognises our potential but also our incompleteness, weakness and timidity. We do not have to pass a test to qualify for baptism. All that is required of us, or in case of small children their parents on their behalf, is the desire to accept the gift of unconditional love and acceptance God in Christ offers and continues to offer for the whole of our lives. There is no other requirement. It is the gift that keeps on giving and one special way in which we maintain that relationship and that trust and that gratitude is through the gift of bread and wine, the gift of Christ himself.

Those early Christians were so bubbling over with this gift, this good news that they kept on telling everyone regardless of who they were and some of them were not Jews. They were Gentiles. But then some of the Jewish Christians said, 'But we can't possibly let those *Gentiles* in, unless, and it is a very important unless, they become Jews first, that is they must be circumcised'. The mutual bitterness, indeed hatred, between Jews and Gentiles was long-standing and deep. Paul, or whoever wrote the letter to the Ephesians, would have none of this attempt to impose conditions. "The Gentiles are fully members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (3:6) or as Paul put it in Galatians: in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (3:28) This was one of the critical moments in the life of the church. It could so easily have become a small Jewish sect. But the message is clear: No one is excluded, absolutely no one. All that is required for us for anyone is to accept "the unsearchable riches of Christ". This is echoed in the story of the wise men coming to offer their gifts to the infant Jesus. Matthew was writing especially for Jewish Christians and this may have been him reassuring Jewish Christians that God's plan from the moment Jesus was born was to include all the people of the earth without exception.

Through the ages the church has continued to put up barriers from time to time to various groups of people. We have to continue to knock those barriers down and to say loud and clear that everyone is welcome. There are no exceptions. Everyone is entitled to become a full member of Christ's church.

Welcome everyone. Alleluia!

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