

How do we define who we are? What shapes and makes us? How is it that we each experience similar events and yet we respond differently? I have been thinking about this a lot over the recent weeks as I realise, I have now been back in Australia of 12 months. Many people have asked me if I now feel settled – and I do. But equally I miss many things about London and the 22 years I lived there. Like each of us, I am shaped by the different experiences of my life – they are part of who I am. London will always be part of what shapes who I am, as much as Braidwood where I grew up, or Sydney or Dubbo, or any community, including this one, in which I have lived. So I have been pondering ...

It seems quite poignant thinking about this during Epiphany season - a time when we explore how Christ is revealed to us – how we understand who Christ, and how we understand ourselves to be shaped in light of this.

The shape of the readings we hear during epiphany season are all about helping us to explore this. They help us to consider the different ways in which the humanity and divinity of Christ is made known to us – how we understand the shape of God with us, and within us.

Like each of us, some of what we know about Jesus comes from the shape of his family, his role and how this message is presented. For us we are shaped by our families of origin as well the family we create for ourselves as adults – and the choices we make in term of role. If, at times in our lives defining who we are feels difficult, how much more is this true for Jesus.

Last week we heard about the arrival of the Magi who follow the star and come to meet the Christ child. They come because they believe that this child is the Messiah – the promised one – the King who will change the world for ever. They come with gifts which mark out clearly how precious Jesus is and are intended to help us to understand who he is!

Gold: The gift of gold was often reserved for royalty. The Magi had seen the star and they recognized the importance of the star in the sky as a sign of a spectacular birth. They wanted it to be clear Jesus was royal.

Frankincense: Frankincense was a highly valued commodity and somewhat rare, but it had a common use directly connected to the worship of God – it was used before the altar in the temple. When frankincense is burned it gives off a sweet

smelling white smoke. The smoke rising from the altar of incense represented the prayers of the people rising to God in heaven. The Magi presenting this gift to Jesus represents the fact that He was indeed divine.

Myrrh: The gift of myrrh seems the most odd of the gifts. Myrrh was extremely valuable and had a number of uses. The most common use was a perfume. The major use of myrrh was for burials. Myrrh was placed on the cloths used to wrap bodies for burial to help prevent the smell of decay following death. The Magi presented this gift to Jesus as a representation that He would one day die – a foretelling so to speak.

The Magi reveal who Jesus is in the gifts which they bring – that he his royal, divine and human. That's what the word Epiphany means – to make manifest – to make known!

But for us, this manifestation does not end there – for some time later we come to the Gospel story of the Baptism of Jesus.

Jesus submitted himself to baptism. He embodied a behaviour he would later command his followers to do as they agreed believe and follow. Baptism is an important sacrament in the life of the church- it is the act that defines that we are

Christians, as we become members of Christ's family. And while this is partially true in the story we hear of the baptism of Jesus, something else happens as well.

Matthew records that as Jesus comes out of the water the heavens open and a dove descends. It is an affirmation of who Jesus is and his coming ministry. In this account of Jesus baptism, God acknowledges Jesus from the heavens as "my Son" (verse 17). It is a profoundly important moment as Jesus is about to encounter the testing in the wilderness (4:1-11) and the beginning of his public ministry (4:12-17).

So what is the point of this in terms of our faith and our understanding of who Jesus is? What is being revealed to us? Like the early disciples we need to hear and understand that it is Jesus who is the son of God and Jesus whom we are called to follow. The revelation – the manifestation which takes place at the baptism of Jesus is that God speaks out – *This is my son in whom I am well pleased.*

In Matthew's version of this story, John initially does not want to baptise Jesus – he reluctant as he already knows who Jesus is. But Jesus makes it clear that this event must take place. There will

always be those who do not want to hear or see or believe the revelation of God – but we must not lose any opportunity to expose who God is – when the opportunity arises.

The power of the story of Jesus baptism is that regardless of whether people want to see or hear – God is being revealed. God continues to act – it is our choice how we respond.

Part of this season of Epiphany is to remind us to keep telling the story of Christ – to keep listening to the word of God and to keep responding to the power of the spirit in our lives. It is so easy at times to think – I know this story – or I know God and to not continue to listen and to respond. The manifestation in these readings is that our faith is a living faith – one where we need to be constantly hearing the word and responding – from the moment of our baptism and every day of our lives of faith.

For us as a consciously welcoming, progressive and inclusive church this should encourage us. God will continue to be revealed to us and we are asked to share this message – but we need to be open to the fact that like John and even Jesus – not everyone will want to hear the message of God's love. But we can celebrate that it is this faith

which as much as anything else defines who we are!

At Jesus' baptism we hear of the Spirit's presence and of God's delight in a chosen Son – we need to hear that over and over again. And we also need to be reminded of God's delight in each of those who respond to the word of God – that is each of us – and know that at the start of this New Year – God delights in us and this should also help define us.

The water of baptism reminds us that in Christ we are made clean, but we are also sustained and refreshed... not just on the day of our baptism, but all the days of our lives. The waters of baptism remind us, that throughout our lives of faith – whatever happens – we can always come back to that same water. We can bless ourselves with the water and remind ourselves of our baptism and claim again that we are forgiven – sustained and refreshed. This water is a constant reminder of who we are – followers who are precious to God! In a few moments we will each be reminded our baptism vows – will each be sprinkled afresh with the waters of baptism. It reminds us that we are refreshed, cleansed and renewed. We are invited

to embrace this – to see God in our midst and in our lives – a big part of who we are.

The gift of what we are about to do is it reminds us of how precious God, how precious the water of life is, and hopefully it also reminds us of how precious we are. And may that inspire us as we journey through the year ahead. Amen.