

The season of Epiphany is about people discovering God in a unique way in Jesus. Epiphany has to do with recognition, about people looking at Jesus and seeing God.

At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation – the fullness of God born of human flesh. During Epiphany we celebrate the ways that God's presence became manifest – visible, revealed and shown forth – in Jesus' life.

And we also reflect on our own experience as witnesses to the mystery of God in Christ and in us.

Epiphany begins with the journey of the Magi to pay homage to the Christ child – wise leaders from far off lands who travelled to find, in Mary and Joseph's home, a king from beyond this world.

Then, we celebrate the baptism of the Lord – an adult now, and on the brink of his public ministry. The one who was both divine and human entered the waters of our sin and lostness to share our need. As he did so, as he gave his body to share solidarity with us, God's Spirit descended on him and a voice from heaven declared God's pleasure.

Today, we look at Jesus' baptism from the side-lines one day later, from the perspective of John who baptised him, and those first disciples who heard John's testimony and went to experience Jesus' radiance for themselves.

For John, the key to recognising Jesus as the Anointed One, was the coming of the Spirit at his baptism. John had been prepared for this act of recognising God in a person – remember the story of him leaping inside his mother Elizabeth's womb when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit them? A connection, a sense of joy in the presence of the Holy One was present within him before he was even born.

Later, as a young man, he made his home in the desert and there received wisdom and insight into Israel's story and what was to come.

In our reading today John talks of ‘the one who sent me to baptise with water’ – who I assume to be God. This same One had told John to look for the Spirit descending and remaining on just one person among the crowd coming to be baptised. That person, he was told, would ‘baptise’ – that is immerse, fill and empower – other people ‘with the Holy Spirit’ and ‘take away the sin of the world.’ So, when Jesus came to be baptised, and the Spirit landed on him ‘from heaven like a dove’ and stayed on him, John knew that what he’d been sent to do had been fulfilled.

From the day of Jesus’ baptism, John began pointing him out to everyone as the ‘Lamb of God,’ and encouraging his own disciples to discover this Spirit-filled man for themselves.

Christian faith is not really about what we believe, or what information or knowledge we’ve managed to accumulate about God. It’s also not really about our good works, our efforts to live well and serve others.

John the baptiser ‘testified’ to what he knew in his heart because of what he had personally experienced. He saw the man Jesus receive the Spirit’s presence and heard the voice from heaven call Jesus ‘beloved.’ This meant he could say with confidence: ‘God is here – God is at work in this place, in this person.’

At his baptism, Jesus received the Spirit that he would later breathe into his disciples and pour out on crowds on the day of Pentecost. It’s the presence of the Holy Spirit in people and places that is the sign of God at work.

All of us who have been baptised in the Christian faith have been filled with and immersed into the same Spirit that descended and remained on Jesus. This Spirit of the living God dwells in us and is present with us in our prayer and worship. It is God’s Spirit who forms our experience of Jesus Christ in the here and now. The Spirit accompanies us in every moment. The Spirit empowers our living and serving, making a way through the confusions of life and guiding our steps with wisdom. The Spirit is the active presence of Christ permeating all of creation and enchanting and enlivening all our experience.

There is nothing and no-one where the Spirit is not at work, no reality that does not shimmer in some way with the indwelling of God.

What does the presence of the Holy Spirit look like? Sound like? Feel like? The trouble is, though we often talk in terms of physical experience, our sense of the Spirit's presence is often not 'sensory,' but intuited in some inner part of our being that recognises the spiritual even if we don't have words for it.

One of our tasks as Christians is, like John the baptiser, to testify to what we have seen, what we have heard and what we have felt even if we have to find new and different words, poetry and picture language to do that. To identify those moments when the Divine reaches in, or better yet, where the blinkers come off and we see more of what was already there.

The difficulty, of course, is that our lives have a way of seeming and feeling very ordinary. Busyness and the materialistic spirit of our times can hem in our thoughts and perceptions, clouding our vision and preventing us from touching into that place within us that can experience awe, and preventing us also from seeing the depths and the 'more' that permeates reality.

For us, the Spirit often seems hidden or absent.

Learning to see and recognise, to taste and feel the presence of Christ in the world is a gateway into joy.

But most of us haven't been taught how to do this seeing and tasting.

We assume that if it isn't immediately or easily apparent it isn't there. Learning to see in the spiritual realm is like learning a language or learning to cook or paint or play an instrument. There is art, there is experimentation, there is practice, there is repetition and discipline and there are constant new horizons – just as we think we've got it all figured out there's a new experience, a new discovery to make that opens out new worlds of colour and pleasure and craft.

Fortunately for us, there are guides in the spiritual life, masters of spiritual sensing who can shape our learning and give us language to express our experience. Some of these are ancestors who have written down their testimony – the mystics and teachers of the Church. Others are living now, offering spiritual companionship and support.

Ultimately it's the community of practitioners that we call the Church where we learn to discern the Spirit in the middle of the ordinary.

And we do this through listening to one another's testimony. What have we heard? What have we seen? What have we felt?

Sharing experience with one another is at the heart of being in Christian community – both the shared experience of gathered prayer and worship and the secondary sharing of reflecting on that experience with one another as we ponder the spiritual life.

This is who we are meant to be together as people baptised in the Spirit. Will be brave enough, vulnerable enough, to follow Jesus' invitation to 'come and see' and then find the right words for our time and place to say: 'we have found the Messiah?'