



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Commemoration of the Feast of the Epiphany

Being Sunday, January 7th 2018

Folks today tend to treat the Epiphany season as a welcome period of celebration and jollity before we get into the dreary Gesima Sundays and the gloom of Lent. But, in fact, the Epiphany season should be a time of high anxiety – a time in which to reflect on the prospect of meeting Jesus face to face.

The question for us to ponder during Epiphanytide is whether or not we shall recognize Jesus when we came face to face with him in the here and now ... in the street ... in our homes ... in our place of work ... in our churches.

The scripture readings traditionally appointed for the Epiphany Season relate how Jesus manifested himself to various people. The truly troubling thing, however, is that most of them failed to recognize the Son of God when they met him face to face. And not just ordinary folk like you and me, but people of exceptional stature: John the Baptist, the Apostles and Jerusalem's top Bible scholars.

The case of John the Baptist is probably the most frightening failure of all. John, you see, was both closely related to Jesus, and also his contemporary. The two were born only six months apart. What's more, the Blessed Virgin Mary and John's mother Elizabeth were united by strong bonds of affection.

Mary paid a long visit to Elizabeth in the early stages of her pregnancy and St. Luke relates the unborn John "leapt" in joyful recognition of the as yet unborn Son of God. Thus, if anyone should have been able to recognize Jesus as God's long awaited Messiah it should have been John.

But John failed to recognize Jesus as the Son of God because his head disagreed with his heart.

Like the vast majority of First Century Jews, he expected the messiah to be a warrior who would drive out the Roman occupiers and lead his people on paths of glorious conquest.

In his early 30s, as foretold by the prophets, he withdrew to the desert beyond the River Jordan. He adopted the traditional military uniform of the time – a heavy, tightly woven camelhair jerkin that was the First Century equivalent of Kevlar – and he subsisted on the First Century equivalent of MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat): carob pods and wild honey. Yet despite all of his prophetic education, John was unable to do what he had done easily as an unborn baby. He failed to recognize his younger cousin as the messiah until God revealed it to him when Jesus presented himself for baptism on the banks of the River Jordan.

The case of St. Peter is almost as shocking. By the time of the

Transfiguration, Peter had personally witnessed Jesus perform thousands of miracles. Yet bedazzled as he was to see the transfigured Jesus with Moses and the Prophet Elijah, he was unable to recognize our Lord as the divine Son of God.

Instead of recognizing Jesus as the lord and master not only of Elijah, and Moses, but the entirety of creation, he simply assumed all three “glistening” persons were coequals and thus he offered to build all three of them mountaintop shrines.

Then there were Jerusalem’s top religious scholars who must have been shocked to find themselves debating theology on equal terms with an eight-year-old boy. How could these men, who knew the scriptures better than most clergy today, have failed to recognize the child Jesus as the Messiah.

What makes their failure particularly ironic is the primary purpose of their scholarship was to identify the Messiah and figure out the time of his arrival.

All of this sets the Three Wise Men's achievement in its proper perspective. The reason for venerating these guys is not merely that they made a long and dangerous journey, nor that they pinned their hopes and fortunes on following something as preposterous star. The reason we should venerate them is that – against all odds – they were able to recognize the baby in the manger for who he really was when they came face to face with him.

The trouble, of course, is that God is so “other”– so vastly different from us it's hard for us to imagine what he is like. He warned that this would be the case. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” he told Prophet Isaiah. As a consequence most people tend to picture God as a human version of an

all-powerful, all knowing father figure – stern, majestic and judgmental. And this, in turn, makes it difficult to recognize God as the laid-back rabbi with a deliciously sly sense of humor that we encounter in the New Testament.

John was unable to rise above cultural conventions of his day to recognize a very close relative as the Messiah. But while John was slow off the mark, many others were slower. For instance, the apostles failed to grasp the full implications of Jesus’ divine mission until the first Pentecost – well after the resurrection.

It would be comforting to imagine that because the resurrection has already taken place, we are off the hook when it comes to recognizing the second coming of the Son of Man. But Jesus told us that this would not be so. He warned us that he would come like a thief in the night; which strongly suggests his arrival is unlikely to conform with any preconceived human notions.

Jesus tells us that for this reason we should strive to see him in everybody we meet. If we do so, he says, we will not be caught out when he arrives for the second time.

Moreover, if we continually strive to see Jesus in our fellow men – our neighbors – chances are they will encounter him in us. This is what Epiphany is really all about – enabling others to meet Jesus through their interactions with Christians like us.

There are none of us that are too sick, too old, too shy, too embarrassed or too untalented to do this for him. All it requires of us is to let Jesus' love for mankind to shine out through our deeds and actions – in the way we treat our fellow men. The truly remarkable thing about this is that, if we let him, Jesus will actually do the job for us. *AMEN.*