

11 January 2026 Epiphany 1

A Reflection

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THE BAPTISM & IDENTITY OF JESUS

Isaiah 42:1–9; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17

We have just finished the season of Christmas and are now entering the season of Epiphany (Revelation) which celebrates the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles.

Epiphany is often symbolized by the Wise Men / Maggi returning to their Gentile homes to tell the news of Christ's birth. The gospel/Good News going out to all the world.

In Christian tradition the Maggi arrived in Bethlehem months after the birth of Jesus, rather than on the night of his birth (as depicted in paintings and postcards). Jesus would have been months old when the Maggi arrived and was still located in Bethlehem – the City of King David.

Mathew, writing for a predominantly Jewish audience wants to emphasize that connection with David and Bethlehem. Jesus is the royal prince, from the house of David, who was promised in the prophecy of Isaiah 42 (which we heard today). The gospel of Matthew emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness.

The first part of the gospel of Mathew is about the identity of Jesus.

If you or I want to discover our identity and who we are, we normally start with our family tree. Our ancestry can shed some light on who we are and why we are as we are.

Chapter one of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus – telling us who he is. His genealogy in Matthew only goes back 42 generations to Abraham, the father of the Jewish race. Jesus is identified as a son of Abraham and a son of David.

Scholars point out that the structure of Matthews gospel is based on the first five books of what we call the Old Testament – based on the Pentateuch (Genesis - Joshua). (See *Christopher R. Smith in his article "Literary Evidences of a Fivefold Structure in the Gospel of Matthew"*)

Jesus is the new Moses who, like Moses, spent time exiled in Egypt, and who, like Moses delivered a new set of commandments from a mountain top in the form of the Beatitudes. Like Moses, Jesus is presented as a new deliverer, delivering Israel from their captivity to Rome and from their sins.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew Jesus is presented in the roles of Jewish Prophet, Priest and King - all rolled into one. He is Moses and David resurrected.

In our gospel reading today we encounter another story about the identity of Jesus. An identity which is conferred on him at his baptism.

I don't know if you've ever experienced an identity crisis.

I think that most of us go through an identity crisis at some time in our lives – usually during our adolescence (teens), as we transition from dependency to having to take responsibility for our own lives.

In psychology, the term 'Identity Crisis' describes a **period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society**, *"many young people suffer an identity crisis when they leave home"*.

The children of immigrants, like myself, often faced a cultural identity crisis just by being in a foreign land. At home we might live like a Samoan/ Chinese/Indian/ English/South African people – but when we were out in the Kiwi culture, at school or at work or at play - we have to switch on to the Kiwi culture with its expectations of us.

In 1998, a cousin of mine, Dr (now Professor) Simaima TiaTia wrote a thesis called, 'Caught Between Cultures'. In that thesis Simaima described the tensions experienced by NZ born Samoans as they sought to meet the expectations of their parents and the expectations of NZ society.

'Good' when those expectations overlap e.g. both cultures place great value on education and sports. 'Not so good' when the expectations clash. E.g. In Samoan culture, giving to village, and extended family projects often cause(ed) tension especially where the Kiwi expectation was/is to save for your own well-being, or to buy your own home.

Second generation Europeans or Asians face similar crises when they return to their parent's fatherland or motherland, only to find that they don't feel at home there. NZ has become their home – even though Kiwis might think of them as Europeans/Asians.

I had a friend in the Army who told me he'd be taking his family on holiday to Hamilton. No offence to Hamiltonians, but I asked him why Hamilton. Even the Springboks refused to stay there. My friend answered, 'The Rhino breeding programme'. Then I remembered he wasn't a Kiwi but an escapee from old Rhodesia – Zimbabwe. His interests were still Rhodesian even though he'd lived in NZ for years.

Through the years, Kiwis themselves have experienced a cultural identity crisis.

Lynn of Tawa and Fred Dagg, Barry Crump, or the late SirTim Shadbolt were parodies of the good Kiwi blokes and bloke-esses.

Right up until the 1980s, NZ TV news readers and reporters were expected to imitate the BBC accent. Philip Sherry (lovely man that he was) was the classic example of Kiwi-BBC.

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NZ identity has been slow in formation over 200 years. But if there is one thing that makes NZ culture distinctive, it is Maoritanga, or the relationship to Maoritanga.

There's the old Joke, Q. 'what do you call a sophisticated Australian?' A. A Kiwi!

NZers /Kiwis are still developing their identities against the rest of the world. It has taken a long time for Kiwi culture to come out of its adolescence and be proud of what it is.

In our second reading from Acts 10, Peter preaches the hope-filled message that says, God shows no partiality when it comes to races – even chosen races – Christ has come for all people – Jews and Gentiles. 'The ground is level at the foot of the cross' (Peter Marshall).

The Apostle Peter's preaching reflected the emerging diversity in the Christian Church which had gone from predominantly Jewish converts – to attracting a huge Gentile following. The church was becoming more like the church of today where diversity is a valuable asset.

The Church became 'Romanized' by the 4th century (380 CE — The Edict of Thessalonica) and became even more diverse as the gospel was carried on the roads built to transport soldiers and commerce from one end of the Roman Empire to the other.

Just look at our own congregation, we have people from South Africa, Holland, Germany, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, England, Scotland and Samoa.

The Early Church was experiencing its own Season of Epiphany as the Gospel reached out from its Jewish origins into the gentile world.

The church was also going through its own identity evolution – emerging as a religion separate from Judaism and adapted to many foreign cultures.

In our gospel reading – the identity of Jesus is firmly established at his baptism.

If we have been following Jesus' journey from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Nazareth, we know that Jesus was known as a Nazarene. The son of carpenter Joseph and his young wife Mary.

Jesus probably spent a short time as a disciple of John the Baptist – who was uncomfortable about baptising Jesus who he saw as his spiritual superior.

At the River Jordan Jesus' identity was firmly established and confirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit (symbolized by a dove). From that moment onwards – according to Matthew - Jesus' self-understanding changed. He heard the voice from heaven declaring him (perhaps inwardly) that he was 'the beloved Son of God'.

After his baptism Jesus did not stand out as someone different from other Nazarenes. When he returned to Nazareth with a new sense of purpose, and declared that he was a

prophet (Isaiah 61), the local people identified him as the son of Mary and Joseph and threatened to cast him off a cliff for his blasphemy.

The relevance for us is that our baptism also helps to define who we are.

I don't remember my baptism, but I do have a Baptism Certificate which says I was baptised as a child in the names of the Trinity, and Baptised into the Body of Christ and into the holy catholic and apostolic Church - (with the Protestant understanding of 'catholic' meaning 'universal' (as my father once explained).

At my confirmation I confirmed the vows made by my parents at my infant baptism – and made them my own. I chose to follow Christ.

I totally understand how beautiful and how marvellous it must be for adults who choose baptism for themselves. Adult baptisms are special – your identity as a Child of God – a member of Christ's Body has been affirmed in total freedom. You have chosen Christ; He has chosen you.

Both forms of baptism (infant and adult) are acceptable in most Christian churches including the PCANZ.

A story is told about the great reformer Martin Luther, how in a moment of depression (which he suffered from a lot), Luther carved on his writing desk: 'I have been baptised!'.

In the world that Luther lived in where people believed in demons behind every tragedy, Luther was making a declaration that said, 'The devil/evil will not get the better of me. Hatred will not get the better of me. Persecution and even death will not get the better of me ...for I have been baptized!'. Baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Nothing can take away the fact of my baptism. It was part of Luther's identity, and it is a part of ours.

As we recall the baptism of Jesus today, it's a good time to reflect on our own baptisms and what impact that has on our identity as people.

Perhaps you could make the sign of the cross on your own forehead and say the words: 'I have been baptised!'