

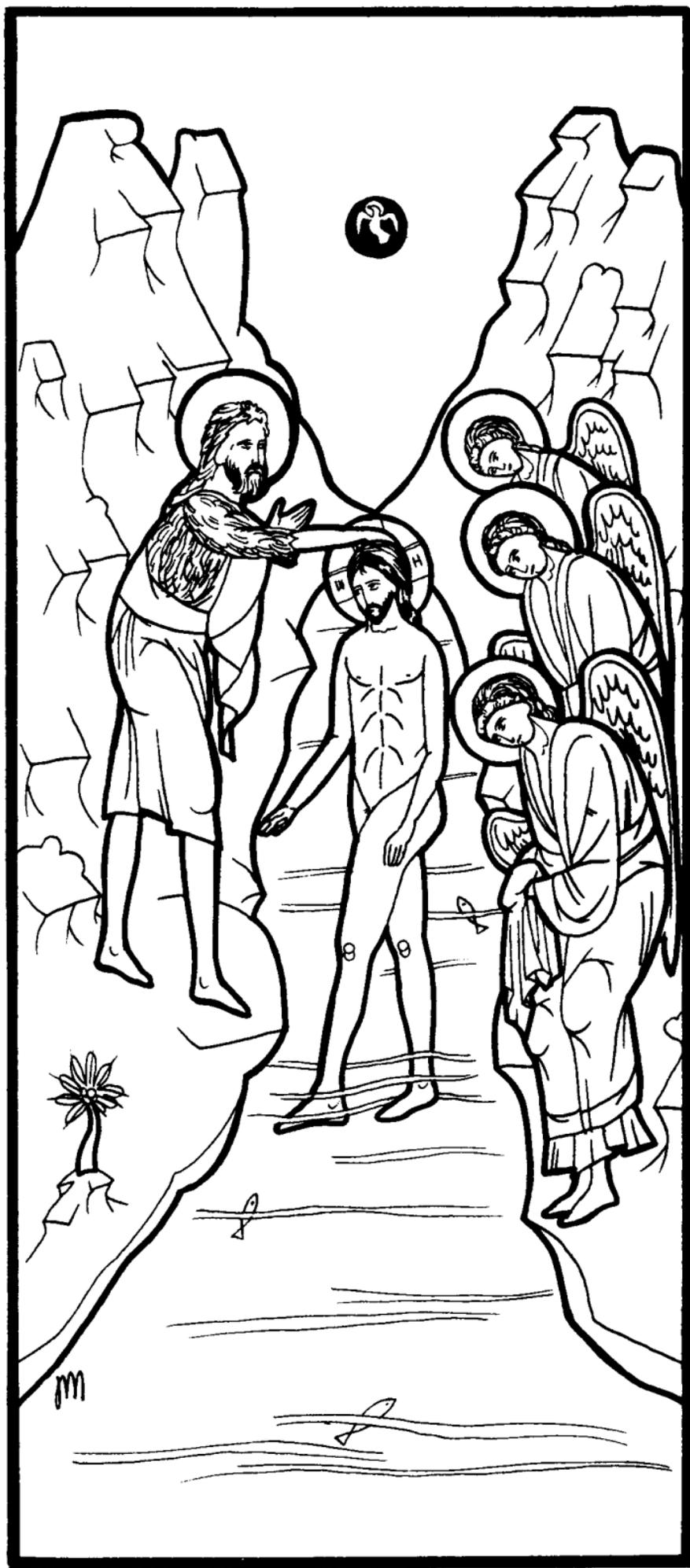
Epiphany

The sixth of January is the feast of the **Epiphany**. Originally it was the one Christian feast of the “shining forth” of God to the world in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth. It included the celebration of Christ’s birth, the adoration of the Wisemen, and all of the childhood events of Christ such as his circumcision and presentation to the temple as well as his baptism by John in the Jordan. There seems to be little doubt that this feast, like Easter and Pentecost, was understood as the fulfillment of a previous Jewish festival, in this case the **Feast of Lights**.

Epiphany means **shining forth** or **manifestation**. The feast is often called, as it is in the Orthodox service books, **Theophany**, which means the shining forth and manifestation of God. The emphasis in the present-day celebration is on the appearance of Jesus as the human Messiah of Israel and the divine Son of God, One of the Holy Trinity with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Thus, in the baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus identifies himself with sinners as the “**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**” (John 1:29), the “**Beloved**” of the Father whose messianic task it is to redeem men from their sins. (Luke 3:21, Mark 1:35). And he is revealed as well as One of the Divine Trinity, testified to by the voice of the Father, and by the Spirit in the form of a dove. This is the central **epiphany** glorified in the main hymns of the feast:

**When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan,
the worship of the Trinity was made manifest!
For the voice of the Father bare witness to Thee,
calling Thee his Beloved Son. And the Spirit,
in the form of a dove, confirmed the truthfulness
of his Word. O Christ our God, who hast re-
vealed Thyself and hast enlightened the world,
glory to Thee. (Troparion)**



Today Thou hast appeared to the universe, and Thy Light, O Lord, has shone on us, who with understanding praise Thee: Thou hast come and revealed Thyself, O Light Unapproachable! (Kontakion)

The services of Epiphany are set up exactly as those of Christmas, although historically it was most certainly Christmas which was made to imitate Epiphany since it was established later. Once again the **Royal Hours** and the **Liturgy of Saint Basil** are celebrated together with **Vespers** on the eve of the feast; and the **Vigil** is made up of **Great Compline** and **Matins**. The prophecies of Epiphany repeat the **God is with Us** from **Isaiah** and stress the foretelling of the Messiah as well as the coming of his forerunner, **John the Baptist**:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Isaiah 40:3-5; Luke 3:4-6)

Once more special psalms are sung to begin the **Divine Liturgy** of the feast, and the baptismal line of **Galatians 3:27** replaces the song of the **Thrice-Holy**. The gospel readings of all the Epiphany services tell of the Lord's baptism by John in the Jordan River. The epistle reading of the **Divine Liturgy** tells of the consequences of the Lord's appearing which is the divine epiphany.

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great

God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11-14)

The main feature of the feast of the Epiphany is the **Great Blessing of Water**. It is prescribed to follow both the Divine Liturgy of the eve of the feast and the Divine Liturgy of the day itself. Usually it is done just once in parish churches at the time when most people can be present. It begins with the singing of special hymns and the censing of the water which has been placed in the center of the church building. Surrounded by candles and flowers, this water stands for the beautiful world of God's original creation and ultimate glorification by Christ in the Kingdom of God. Sometimes this service of blessing is done out of doors at a place where the water is flowing naturally.

The voice of the Lord cries over the waters, saying: Come all ye, receive the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God, even Christ who is made manifest.

Today the nature of water is sanctified. Jordan is divided in two, and turns back the stream of its waters, beholding the Master being baptized.

As a man Thou didst come to that river, O Christ our King, and dost hasten O Good One, to receive the baptism of a servant at the hands of the Forerunner (John), because of our sins, O Lover of Man. (Hymns of the Great Blessing of Waters)

Following are three readings from the Prophecy of Isaiah concerning the messianic age:

Let the thirsty wilderness be glad, let the desert rejoice, let it blossom as a rose, let it blossom abundantly, let everything rejoice . . . (Isaiah 35: 1-10)

Go to that water, O you who thirst, and as many as have no money, let them eat and drink without price, both wine and fat . . . (Isaiah 55:1-13)

With joy draw the water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day shall you say: Confess ye unto the Lord and call upon his Name; declare his glorious deeds . . . his Name is exalted . . . Hymn the Name of the Lord . . . Rejoice and exult . . . (Isaiah 12:3-6)

After the epistle (I Corinthians 1:10-14) and the gospel reading (Mark 1:9-11) the special great litany is chanted invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the water and upon those who will partake of it. It ends with the great prayer of the cosmic glorification of God in which Christ is called upon to sanctify the water, and all men and all creation, by the manifestation of his saving and sanctifying divine presence by the indwelling of the Holy and Good and Life-creating Spirit.

As the troparion of the feast is sung, the celebrant immerses the Cross into the water three times and then proceeds to sprinkle the water in the four directions of the world. He then blesses the people and their homes with the sanctified water which stands for the salvation of all men and all creation which Christ has effected by his "epiphany" in the flesh for the life of the world.

Sometimes people think that the blessing of water and the practice of drinking it and sprinkling it over everyone and everything is a "paganism" which has falsely entered the Christian Church. We know, however, that this ritual was practiced by the People of God in the Old Testament, and that in the Christian Church it has a very special and important significance.

It is the faith of Christians that since the Son of God has taken human flesh and has been immersed in the streams of the Jordan, all matter is sanctified and

made pure in him, purged of its death-dealing qualities inherited from the devil and the wickedness of men. In the Lord's epiphany all creation becomes good again, indeed "very good," the way that God himself made it and proclaimed it to be in the beginning when **"the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters"** (Genesis 1:2) and when the "Breath of Life" was breathing in man and in everything that God made. (Genesis 1:30; 2:7)

The world and everything in it is indeed **"very good"** (Genesis 1:31) and when it becomes polluted, corrupted and dead, God saves it once more by effecting the "new creation" in Christ, his divine Son and our Lord by the grace of the Holy Spirit. (Galatians 6:15) This is what is celebrated on Epiphany, particularly in the **Great Blessing of Water**. The consecration of the waters on this feast places the entire world—through its "prime element" of water—in the perspective of the cosmic creation, sanctification, and glorification of the Kingdom of God in Christ and the Spirit. It tells us that man and the world were indeed created and saved in order to be **"filled with all the fullness of God"** (Ephesians 3:19), the **"fullness of him who fills all in all."** (Ephesians 1:22) It tells us that Christ, in whom **"the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,"** is and shall be truly **"all, and in all."** (Colossians 2:9, 3:11) It tells us as well that the **"new heavens and the new earth"** which God has promised through his prophets and apostles (Isaiah 66:22; II Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1) are truly "with us" already now in the mystery of Christ and his Church.

Thus, the sanctification and sprinkling of the Epiphany water is no pagan ritual. It is the expression of the most central fact of the Christian vision of man, his life and his world. It is the liturgical testimony that the vocation and destiny of creation is to be **"filled with all the fullness of God."** (Ephesians 3:19)