



Sunday 12th January 2025

The Baptism of Christ

The First Sunday of Epiphany

Gospel Reading

Luke 3.15-17, 21,22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

The Baptism of Jesus

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Other Readings: Isaiah 43.1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8.14-17

Homily

Today the Church celebrates the Baptism of Jesus.

That may seem strange. For us, it's only just after Christmas and the Feast of Epiphany, when we remembered the visit of the Magi to the young Jesus. Now here Jesus is as an adult, just about to begin his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. We'll be doing a bit more jumping around the timeline in this Epiphany season as we reflect on other events that laid the foundation of Jesus' public ministry.

Today's gospel account tells us that John the Baptist called people to a baptism of repentance in the waters of the river Jordan. John saw himself as preparing the way for Jesus and was amazed when he turned up for baptism. Elsewhere in the Bible, Matthew tells us that John protested against this saying that he, John, is the one who needs Baptism. But Jesus insisted and so demonstrated his perfect identification with the humanity he came to redeem.

At the age of 30, the time set in Judaism for adults to make life-changing decisions, Jesus left home, abandoned his family and the family business and associated himself with a radical preacher, John. John was consumed by a sense of imminent judgement that only national

repentance and moral re-construction might avert. To those who responded, he administered a baptism used for converts to Judaism. In doing so, he was declaring that the nation's special relationship with God was in need of complete renewal. Those who clung to a past that assured them they were a 'chosen people' found that assurance challenged in a call to leave the past behind and embrace God's future.

It seems surprising that Jesus offered himself for a baptism of repentance, at least on the lines we know it. That he should present himself for a convert's baptism, identifying himself with the faithlessness of his people is astonishing. He was, himself, blameless. Yet, in his baptism, Jesus becomes, in Karl Barth's words: 'the one great Sinner who repents', in other words, the fully representative Human before God. All this foreshadows the cross, where the one human being who lived in complete fidelity with God absorbed human sin, shame and guilt and gave himself up as a perfect offering on behalf of all people.

Despite having outlined their family relationship in earlier chapters, Luke doesn't tell us of any direct conversation between John and Jesus in this baptism scene. In fact, Luke moves swiftly to the immediate aftermath of the baptism itself. Now, 'the heaven was opened,' and the messenger of God was heard proclaiming to the world the Epiphany theme: this Jesus is God's own Son. The Holy Spirit appears, descending on Jesus in a way that hints that his impending ministry will be an act of new creation. Jesus arrives and the heart of God's salvation plan begins to be revealed, offering his Spirit to all who want a new start.

At baptism services today, baptism is described as being 'born again of water and the Spirit'. For Jesus, baptism was certainly a new start, the moment when his life and ministry turned to face the reality of the promise of God's Kingdom. That ministry not only changed Jesus' own life but also the lives of all those who were then, and are now, inspired and influenced by it. Jesus' baptism and the personal affirmation from God that accompanied it lay another plank in the foundations of that ministry.

As Jesus's disciples today, we face constant new beginnings. We are reminded of this as we enter a new calendar year. In our lives we constantly face unexpected challenges and opportunities as well as disappointments and failures. Yet each of these new chapters also represents an ending. A new beginning is also a time of grieving for what is lost, a time of giving thanks for what has ended, a time of reflection on what is past. Baptism is all about letting go of the past and committing to God's future. Although there is only 'one baptism' for each of us, its pattern of letting go and moving on is a constant theme of the Christian way of life. As we look today at the story of Jesus' own baptism, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit descended 'like a dove'. If we read on, we discover that the Spirit then led him into the desert for 40 days to be tempted. And as we face new beginnings, we too may be led to face

challenges for which we feel ill-prepared. Let us pray in confident faith that God's promised Holy Spirit will be with us too.

Conversation Questions

1. How do we encounter the waters of rebirth once we have been baptised?
2. The manifestation of the Holy Spirit, how do we recognise it?
3. Is there anything else from the passage that speaks to you not already discussed?
What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today?

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

*Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus
revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

(or)

*Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognize him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.*

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