

Baptism of Christ (Epiphany II) 2019 Year C

One of the most joyful parts of my ministry is that of baptism, when I am privileged to be a partaker in one of the most important moments a person experiences on their journey of faith. At our rather battered, cracked yet beloved font, I have poured the water of new life in the Spirit over the heads of several hundred children and adults since I became vicar. Some baptisms stand out. The moment when the little boy I was holding turned his face up just as I poured the water – straight into his eyes, at which point he attached his hand tightly to one of my ears until I handed him back! I was assured by his parents that this was a regular trait, and he certainly didn't cry. Then there were two different baptisms last year, first of Charlie, an eight-year-old who had a great wish to be baptized – the service one of great joy, and, dare I say it, of fun. Some of you attended the adult baptism of Max, who was taking on the responsibilities of a Godparent to his nephew, and earnestly desired baptism himself.

Today, as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, the Church marks the end of the Christmas season, although we shall be reminded of the significance of the birth of the Christ child by the presence of the crib until we celebrate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple on February 2nd. Last week we celebrated the Epiphany of the Lord – something which the Western Church links to the visit of the Magi recorded in Matthew's Gospel and teaches is the manifestation of Jesus to the whole of humanity.

In Orthodox Churches, Epiphany commemorates the Baptism of Jesus and is known as the Theophany – the manifestation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Self-giver and Revivifier if you like - directly related to the imagery contained in the Gospel accounts of the Baptism of Jesus. Because the eastern Churches use the Julian Calendar, they are still a couple of weeks away from Epiphany, when we shall no doubt see somewhere in the news the rather terrifying sight of Mr Putin arising from the waters of the Frozen River Moskva, surrounded by orthodox clergy!

You won't very often hear me complaining that the Sunday readings are too short; quite the reverse normally. However, the only thing that can be said about today's 'filleted' Gospel is that it does give us the sense of the brevity of Luke's version of the Baptism of the Lord, so short that it can barely be called an account. In this respect it is more related to John's (1: 32-34) which takes the form of a testimony by John the Baptist. What we do not get in full is the power of John's preparation for the coming of the Messiah, a fire and brimstone affair, full of Lukan detail. If you have a chance, do read the whole of Chapter 3. You will find, first, as I say, the gripping ministry of John the Baptist. In this, all eyes are focused on the Baptist. At the height of his power, people are drawn to his call to repentance which he preaches with great ferocity. John predicts that the Messiah will confirm his preaching and bring even further devastating judgement.

Out of the crowd emerges Jesus, and the same baptism the crowd has received becomes his. This identification by Jesus with the brokenness in human nature which John is addressing is then transformed by Luke into what sounds like a divine 'love-in.' The divine

confirmation of the beloved symbolized by the Holy Spirit's descending like a dove - a wonderful image which Luke uses to take us back to the Creation story in Genesis (the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the deep) - and then the divine voice addressing the beloved one and affirming that he is God's love incarnate.

The Messianic judgement John preached about becomes one coloured not by fire and brimstone but forgiving love. In the future ministry of Jesus, he will refer to judgement, sometimes in harsh words, but this is always coloured by the identification of God with our humanity. It's no mistake that Luke immediately follows the Baptism of the Lord with a genealogy which traces Jesus's ancestry back to Adam. In other words, the desire of God to reveal that participation in the divine nature is something open to all. As I often say, the self-offering Love of Jesus points all of humanity to the fullness of life to be found in following his example in serving the 'other' rather than the 'self,' true life - and a call to know that we too are the beloved of God.

Isaiah writes wonderfully in the portion today of the intimacy of this call; 'I have called you by name, you are mine.' We are called to reveal the glory of God and do this in the knowledge of what Jesus achieves for us in the call to continual new life. We could get bogged down in the language of redemption and worthiness. Yet, as writes Jane Williams, God calls us to participate in Kingdom Life 'not because we are worthy but because, inexplicably, he loves us.'

I spoke of Baptism when I began. The powerful imagery used in the blessing of the water talks of Faith history, from the hovering of the Spirit over the face of the deep in creation, to the parting of the Red Sea and Jesus's own Baptism. His Baptism is a mystery of light; of divine confirmation, and so too is ours. It matters not how young or old we are when we are baptized. It will mean that we have to rely on parents and godparents if we are christened as infants or children, and sometime things can go awry. Nevertheless, every Baptism is a call to the mystery of God's light. However, remembering that it is a one-off (and don't let anyone tell you any different), it requires our participation in order to reach its potential! As I very often say at baptisms, it is like being given a gift. It's no use leaving it wrapped up with a large gift bow on it. To enjoy the fullness of Baptism life - the life of the Kingdom -you must 'unwrap' the present and allow the gift of the Holy Spirit to work within.

The great adventure of Kingdom life provides us not just with the knowledge of God's love for us, but the answer to lives of true fulfilment. Forget Brexit, deal or no deal. Our call to the Baptismal life of the Kingdom is the **real** deal!



The Baptism of Christ – 1734 by Francesco Trevisani

Isaiah 43: 1-7

43 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

³ For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴ Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;

⁶ I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold';
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—

⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'

Acts 8: 14-17

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶ (for as yet the Spirit had not come^[e] upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷ Then Peter and John^[d] laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

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^[e] 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.'

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.'