

The Baptism of Christ (Epiphany II) 2020 Year A

I wonder if any person here today remembers their own baptism? The chances are that if you do, you were either baptised as an older child or adult. Yet even for those who don't remember, your baptism is one of the defining moments of your life, certainly in terms of faith. The language surrounding the Baptismal Rite is ancient and uses imagery surrounding the knowledge of God's Love and relationship with humanity which unfolds throughout the Bible until we reach the Christ. Here is part of the Blessing of the Water I say each time I baptise people:

*We thank you, almighty God, for the gift of water
to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life.
Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.
Through water you led the children of Israel
from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.
In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John
and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ,
to lead us from the death of sin to newness of life.*

*We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*

This is all very powerful imagery which I will return to later. So too was our Gospel reading today. Very often at Baptisms, I ask for the opening of Mark's Gospel to be read, and it, of course, jumps straight to the Baptism of Christ. There is no birth narrative. The elements of both Luke and Mark are like Matthew's, although there are differences. Mark plays up the drama of the moment, so I am always keen to point out that, the heavens probably won't be torn apart when I pour the water of those I am baptising, and a divine voice will probably not be heard!

What are we to make of the Baptism of Christ? Why would the one whom we call 'sinless' require the baptism of John in the river Jordan? There was obviously a feeling by the early church of some element of embarrassment surrounds this moment, yet it is an important part of the journey for Jesus; one, like Epiphany, of manifestation - the Christ revealed at the start of his ministry. Matthew displays this unease more than any other of the Gospel writers. John smooths the baptism into a passing oblique reference whilst Mark and Luke do not give John the major role he has in Matthew's account. His role as the forerunner is vital to Matthew's before and after sense of the importance of this moment.

This leads us to John's conversation with Jesus, which gives us a real sense of the unease surrounding his baptism. *'John tried to prevent him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'* Again, I remind you, WHY would the 'sinless' one require a baptism which in John's terms symbolised a washing away of sin? It seems to me to be all about identity and the sense of a new heaven and earth being wrought in and through Jesus. Yet he wants his complete identification with humanity – the abiding presence with each one of us here

today – to be absolutely clear. Jesus replies to John’s question with these words: ‘*Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.*’

All righteousness. Here we have a central theme for Matthew – relationship. Righteousness might sound a very ‘churchy’ word, yet at its heart is an understanding of what sort of a relationship we desire with God. Following Jesus means living with the Gospel call on our hearts. Jesus points to this throughout his ministry; through teaching, healing and (sometimes) admonition. But ultimately, he reveals the power of God’s love for us, together with the burning desire for **our** response, through death and resurrection. The cross is the sign of just how much we are loved.

John’s baptism now becomes irrelevant. Jesus and the disciples will not baptise anyone during his ministry because Jesus IS the present reality of God, and there is no need of symbols because the disciples come to know that Emmanuel – God is with them.

So what of Christian baptism? Well, it is neither the same as that offered by John, because Jesus brings about a new age, nor is it the same Jesus experiences with the divine confirmation from heaven (and Matthew wants us to remember the words of Isaiah: ‘*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*’ Isaiah 64: 1)

Let me take you back to that Blessing over the Waters of baptism. Baptism is the act through which we become part of the Divine message to humanity through the way in which we journey in faith and reveal this to the world. Jesus fulfils all righteousness through his own baptism as a sign to the world and calls us to follow him in the same spirit. Baptism is the new call to new life in which we become part of the Body of Christ.

We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.

In it we are buried with Christ in his death.

By it we share in his resurrection.

Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

The Baptism of the Lord 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. If we are christened as infants or children things can go awry, particularly if our parents or Godparents are not diligent in keeping their promises to enable the baptised person to know and understand the divine call within their lives. Nevertheless, every Baptism is a call to participate in the living presence of God’s love. It is a one-off (and don’t let anyone tell you any different) and requires our absolute participation in order to reach its potential. To enjoy the fullness of Baptismal life - the life of the Kingdom – we are called to allow the Holy Spirit to work within and lead us on a journey throughout the whole of our lives. In doing so we have the same assurance that Jesus received: ‘This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

There really isn’t anything better in life!



Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist - Francesco Trevisani (1656 – 1746) – Leeds Art Gallery

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Acts 10: 34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

Matthew 3: 13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'