

St Mary Abbots

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Father Christopher

What is so special about the beginning of a new year? Why does it make any difference?

The fact that the calendar year starts on 1st January is after all totally arbitrary. It used to start on Lady Day, 25th March, before the Gregorian calendar was adopted in the eighteenth century. And yet psychologically it is good for us to have a time to begin again isn't it?

Whether it's in January, or with a new school year in September, or at any point in our life where we seemingly have a fresh start; even if the reality is that we carry with us all that we are from before, our experience, and much of whatever our situation before might have been.

At the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashanah, which is celebrated in September, traditionally prayers are said by flowing water, or stones are thrown into it, to symbolise the casting away of sins, and a new beginning.

We Christians repent of our sins and receive forgiveness, together at the start of Mass, and in private confession; and begin again time and again.

It seems we all need new beginnings; the possibility of a fresh start. And the baptism that John proclaimed was one of repentance, of turning towards a new future.

From what we can gather from the gospel account, people would have been submerged in the River Jordan while actually confessing their sins. We can't know precisely how this happened, and I wouldn't recommend opening your mouth while under water, even to confess your sins, but you get the idea.

Now, Jesus was of course without sin, and so there has been much debate about why He needed to receive John's baptism. After all, He had nothing to repent of. But, aside from setting an example to the rest of us, Jesus's baptism marked a new beginning, both for Him and for the world. The affirmation from the Father: '*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*', with the descent on Him of the Holy Spirit, began His ministry; traditionally at the age of 30, which was to last three years.

So, while the church year begins at Advent, we do celebrate the beginning of Jesus's ministry with the start of the calendar year in January.

The tearing apart of the heavens, and the descent of the dove, are both things that for Jews of the first century had apocalyptic significance.

We may think of apocalypse as signifying the end times and judgment, which they do. But with ending comes new beginnings. And far more than the New Year being a new beginning for all of us, in one way or another, it is the start of a new life for Harriet and Maxim. A new life in Christ, as the newest members of the worldwide Church for the split second in which they are baptised, before the next baptism somewhere else, no doubt infinitesimally soon afterwards. And, as with Christ, a new life, living with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which we believe is given in baptism, to help guide you both in your growth in faith and in all that life has in store for you.

As we heard in our reading from Isaiah:

'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.'

We also celebrate the simple gift of their lives – who Maxim and Harriet are to their families and friends; and what God has already been doing in their lives. And I hope that as we look forward to what might lie ahead of us in the year ahead, we might also recommit ourselves to the faith of our own baptism. When you hear the promises which Harriet and Maxim will shortly have made on their behalf, ask yourself whether you stand fast with them in those promises. And if you do, then let us all look forward with hope to 2022, alongside Maxim and Harriet:

With the hope that God remains with us. With the hope that we can and *do* begin again, leaving our sins behind us; and committing over to serving both God and our brothers and sisters, all of whom are made in the image of Christ.

With the hope of believing that God's kingdom *will* come. And, that with God's blessing and the power of the Holy Spirit, we too can and *will* play our part in showing the world His love in 2022; and in bringing in His Kingdom, to a world so very much in need of it.

Amen