

Sermon for Matins – Baptism of Christ
Joshua 3:1-8, 14-end and Hebrews 1:1-12
Mother Alice

Today is the 1st Sunday of Epiphany, where we mark the Baptism of Christ. As we journey through Epiphany season, the call on us as disciples of Christ is to ask the question: ‘Who is this Jesus, and what about Him does God wish to reveal to us today?’. What happened at the baptism of Christ, and what difference does it make to our knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is, and therefore to our lives as disciples?

When I became a Christian as a teenager, I worshipped initially at a Church in the NewFrontiers network, which is an evangelical group of baptist Churches. We had in the floor of our Church building a huge pool which once a month was filled for full immersion baptisms. I was so captivated by the power of these baptisms, which were preceded by the adult candidate giving a testimony of their faith journey and the difference Jesus made in their lives, and, a few years after beginning to attend the church, I too, stood up, gave my testimony, and entered into the pool for a full immersion baptism. Although I subsequently decided to worship at an Anglican Church, and through 6 years of theological study both as an Undergraduate and then as a Postgraduate Ordinand in training for ministry, my views on baptism changed significantly, I still think an adult baptism is the most profound occasion in the life of a Church community. An adult who has responded to the call of Christ, who has come willingly and obediently in faith, who can speak the baptismal declarations and vows and understand the symbolism and power of what is taking place, and who can articulate a true sense of repentance, a desire to ‘die to sin and be born again’, is the most extraordinary demonstration of the love of Christ, of the faithfulness of God, and a sign of encouragement that God continues to add to our number those whom he is calling.

Baptism marks the beginning of our journey in faith – a public declaration, a sacrament in which the power of the Holy Spirit makes holy the water to cleanse and refresh both our outer selves and our inner lives – and it is no wonder that people today continue to flock to the waters of the Jordan river, to be baptised, as Jesus was, there in the Holy Land.

The significance of the Jordan river as a site for purification is ancient in origin. In our reading from Joshua chapter 3 we see the people of Israel, led by Joshua, making their way across to the land on the other side of the Jordan river. Joshua’s command is that the ark of the covenant, the casket containing both the tablets of the 10 commandments and indeed the presence of God Almighty himself, should go first, and that the priests, followed by the people, should make themselves holy by standing in the river. We are told that the river was in harvest season, and was therefore flooded and too wide to cross, but by the faithfulness of Joshua and the priests, a way across is made, and by the end they are standing on dry land. God has made a miracle in scenes similar to the miracle of the crossing of the red sea, 40 years earlier. It is the Jordan that is the physical and spiritual gateway therefore to Jericho, and beyond it Jerusalem, the resting place of the ark of the covenant, and the site of the Temple of Ancient Israel.

It makes sense then, that the Jordan is the site of John the Baptist’s ministry of baptism – a river of deep spiritual significance, a river into which generations of Jews have brought themselves for ritual purification. For Jesus to be baptised there is a continuity, an expectation even, that makes sense of this site being the place to which he comes to be purified ahead of beginning his ministry. There is a deep sense of fulfilment, one which the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews draws upon in their description and analysis of what is taking place. And yet there is a tension. If Jesus is the Son of God, why did he need to be baptised? What purification is necessary, if Jesus is the sinless, spotless rose? Indeed even John the Baptist himself seems unsure, his humility and deep sense of honour not quite masking a sense of uncertainty when he asks: I should be baptised by you and yet you come to me? The Letter to the Hebrews, written as it is to a Jewish audience, concludes that the baptism of Jesus demonstrates the Sonship and the Kingship of Christ: it is ultimately his obedience which reveals him as the Son of God, his decision to do something quite ordinary in responding to

John the Baptist's call, that then enables something quite extraordinary to take place in the revelation that follows where the heavens part and the voice of the Father is heard affirming that Jesus is His beloved Son.

But there is something unique about Jesus' Baptism, in the way in which it both provides continuity and change. To some, his baptism is expected, necessary to fulfil all righteousness. The rite of purification, especially before beginning a period of prayer and fasting, and indeed preaching and teaching, is right and fitting for this man Jesus, the Jew. And yet in other ways his baptism opens up a whole range of extraordinary difference, change, possibility, challenge even. Much of the Letter to the Hebrews, and the other New Testament Epistles, is concerned with the identity of Christ: who is this Jesus, and what about him does God wish to reveal to us today? What does his baptism teach us about his relationship to the Father, to the angels, to the powers and principalities, to the Law, to the prophets, even to John the Baptist.?

There is something profoundly challenging about the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Great High Priest, himself chose to present himself for baptism. The highest of high once again becoming the lowest of low – joining the crowds of those repenting, becoming as one of them, going deep into the water, and then rising up, this astonishingly powerful symbol of dying to sin and rising to new life. When Jesus does this, he makes this new life possible for us too – this simple act becomes the cornerstone of Christian identity right from the earliest days of the Christian church. The Acts of the Apostles is a glorious account of so many who responded to the call to 'repent and be baptised'.

I wonder what it means to you that Jesus was baptised? Whether his baptism feels comfortable – expected, necessary, a fulfilment? Or uncomfortable – something quite new, challenging, confusing even about his identity? We give thanks to God for the ways in which he continues to open our eyes and hearts to see him afresh, and pray that this Epiphany season his revelation will be not just to us, but to those family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues – all who we love and for whom we pray. The Christ who came, born as a baby, revealed as a King by the visitation of the Wise men, revealed as the Son of God by his Baptism – is the Christ who continues to break through and establish his Kingdom. Let us choose to have our eyes and ear and hearts open to receive and welcome him this new year.

Amen.