

Baptism of Jesus – 10 January 2021

At the start of any new year it's helpful to look back and to look forward.

Most of us probably want to close the book on 2020 and move ahead to what we hope are better days ... but the small Covid outbreaks during the Christmas–New Year period suggest that Covid will be present and disruptive for some time to come.

But what if we look further back ... to the time when we were first introduced to Jesus ... and when we were baptised ... whether as a child or as an adult. How did we see our life playing out? What expectations did we have for our life of faith? What hopes, dreams, and joys did we envisage?

As we ponder Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan – we are encouraged to



remember the Israelites entering the Promised Land by crossing the River Jordan, all the promises of hope and renewal in the Prophets, the sense of excitement as John the Baptist spoke about the more powerful One who was to come, whose sandals he was unworthy to untie, the One who would baptise others – not in water but with God's

Holy Spirit.

And we're encouraged to look forward to the ministry of Jesus, the spread of his message of good news throughout the world ... and to what God is doing in our midst today ... even in the middle of a global pandemic that in many places seems to be getting worse rather than better.

What is Jesus' baptism really about?

Mark gives us little background as he plunges directly into the story of John the Baptist. We're told that John is the voice from Isaiah crying in the wilderness 'Prepare the way of the Lord'. He preaches a message of repentance – changing

one's mind and turning one's actions back to God and God's ways.

And then we're introduced to Jesus ... who just **appears** at the Jordan. This is part of Mark's style of course ... who likes to offer us brief scenes, brief sketches ... without explanation ... leaving plenty of gaps for us to fill in as readers ... as we try to work out who this Jesus is and what he is all about.

If Jesus is responding to John's message, then he is showing his desire to **repent** ... to turn back to God's ways. But we already know from the opening



verse of Mark's Gospel that Jesus is to be regarded as the **Son of God**, and this is confirmed after Jesus' baptism when an unidentified voice – presumably **God's** voice – confirms that Jesus is in fact God's Son. Further, he is **loved** by God who is well pleased with him.

... which raises a number of

questions

- If Jesus is the Son of God, why does he need to repent if God is already well pleased with him? Is he simply identifying with all the people of Jerusalem who were going out to John to be baptised?
- And what does it mean for him to be called **Son of God**? Is it another way of saying he will be the Messiah or King? Or does he somehow **embody** God's character?
- And did anyone other than Jesus hear the voice from heaven ... or was it purely words heard in Jesus' head? ... we're not told.

Yes the voice affirms Jesus' status and identity... but more significant perhaps is **God's Spirit** that descends on him like a dove ... and as we read on in the story we are invited, I think, to join the dots and see that it is God's presence with and within Jesus – through the Spirit – who **inspires, empowers and guides** Jesus' ministry ... and distinguishes it from all those who came before or will come afterwards ...

So Jesus is now ready to begin his ministry ... or is he? According to Mark, there is one more step needed first, which is the testing in the wilderness, a



story that is typically read on the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Again Mark says very little about this except that it lasted a long time (40 days) and involved the Spirit, Satan, wild beasts and angels.

Curious mix of characters ... which is why perhaps Matthew and Luke both enlarge on this experience to help us make

sense of it. But perhaps Mark wants to indicate that although Jesus is God's Son, his ministry will not be easy ... it will involve much **testing** ... and will involve **unseen spiritual forces** ... God's Spirit, demons and angels ... that are to be regarded as both real and powerful in the unfolding story.

Our understanding of baptism is broader than this one story about John and Jesus ... as we also have the reflections of **Paul** who compared baptism – at least full immersion baptism – to participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus – as we go under the water and then rise to new life.

... and the writings of **John** who linked baptism to being born again by God's Spirit.

... or the writings of **Luke** in Acts where baptism is seen as part of an initiation or entry into the life of the church community.

In later church history, baptism is seen as one of the two core sacraments along with Communion, that are shared across the church.

The Uniting Church has its own view of baptism, which is captured in the baptism liturgy. It reads like this ...

*Baptism is Christ's gift.
It is the visible sign by which the Spirit of
God
joins people to Jesus Christ
and incorporates them into his body, the
Church.*

*In his own baptism in the Jordan by John,
Jesus identified himself with humanity
in its brokenness and sin;
his baptism was completed in his death and resurrection.*

*By God's grace,
baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ,
so that whatever is his may be called ours.*

*By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own
and set free from the power of sin and death.*

*Thus claimed by God,
we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit
that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,
share in his ministry in the world and grow to maturity,
awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.*



With these words, baptism identifies us closely with Jesus so that what is said about Jesus is also said about us ... we also are **known** by God, **beloved** by God, **empowered** by God's Spirit to live and witness as God's people in the world. What a blessing! And what a challenge!

What might this look like? In the words of the baptism liturgy once more ...

*You are called to the worship, witness and service of God,
in the power of the Holy Spirit ...
... to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ
... to seek Christ in all people
... to love your neighbour as yourself
... to strive for justice and peace
... to respect the dignity of every person*

Living this out here and now, every day, is a high calling that **every one of us** is called to take up ... and to do that we need **God's help** and direction and empowering ... just as Jesus did.

It's also why we need the help and support of **each other**.

Once more in the words of the baptism liturgy ...

*With God's help, we will live out our baptism as a loving **community** in Christ: nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer and encouraging one another in service, until Christ comes*

So as we begin this new year, and as we begin once more to engage with what it means for us to be followers of Jesus in the unfolding days of 2021 may we be challenged afresh by the words of St Teresa of Avila...

*Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes,
you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

In other years and in other situations I might have invited you to come forward to the baptism font at this point and to splash some of its water over yourself and to sign yourself with the sign of the cross ... but not this year.

Instead we're going to stand and say a creed written by Bruce Prewer:

A CREED (by Bruce Prewer)

*I believe in God
who speaks through the prophets
and lifts our gaze towards beautiful paths to walk.*

*I believe in Christ Jesus,
free of corruption yet willingly numbered among the sinners,
baptised in the waters of the Jordan.*

*I believe in the Spirit
who rested on Jesus like a dove,
and who inspired him with such love
as the world has not seen before or since.*

*I believe in myself as a baptised child of God,
the recipient of healing grace.
With the help of God,
I will attempt to live out my beliefs all the days of my life,
and by God's grace, dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*