

Sermon for Amersham Free Church, Jan 12th 2020

Readings: Isaiah 42.1-9; Matthew 3.13-17

Thirteen years ago, almost to the day, my son Thomas was baptised. Like today, it was the day when the church remembered Christ's baptism. It seemed a wonderful day to be baptised – listening to the account of Jesus' own baptism and then understanding the symbolism of being washed clean and of dying and rising to new life in Christ in that context. I wonder how many of you remember your baptism? Some of you will have been baptised as babies or small children, but others of you may have been baptised as adults and have a clear recollection of the day. Some people are fully immersed in a pool or even a river, while others are simply sprinkled with water. Baptism is one of two sacraments that all the churches agree are a visible symbol of the reality of God and a channel of his grace. It is also, uniquely, the one sacrament that any baptised Christian can enact, if they do it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Gospel reading we heard this morning draws our attention to this very thing – the nature of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through a vivid picture of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, we are invited us to understand more about who God is and what God has done for us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

I'm always amazed at how much theology and symbolism the Gospel writers can squeeze into just a few verses. Mark's account of Jesus' baptism takes just three verses: Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan, and was baptised by John. Coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens were torn open and the spirit descended upon him like a dove. Then a voice from heaven declared, "You are my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There are no words wasted in Mark – he says what happened and then bounds on to the next thing. But everything about it tells us something about who Jesus is and about what God is doing in and through him. There is no controversy here in Mark, no exchange between Jesus and John about whether it was right for John to baptise him or not.

But by the time Matthew was writing, questions had arisen about the relationship between Jesus and John. Matthew needs to explain what was going on. We might well ask, as it seems some people did back then, why **was** Jesus baptised by John? Wasn't John calling people to a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins? But Jesus was supposedly without sin – this doesn't make sense! And John was just a prophet – how was **he** worthy to baptise the son of God? But it's not about John's worthiness or otherwise. It's about the significance and the symbolism of the baptism.

Firstly, this baptism is part of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation, and so what we need to look at here is the whole constellation of powerful images just beneath the surface of the story. It's a bit like looking through a kaleidoscope – the same colours twist and change into different patterns as we turn it.

One of the pictures we see is something we've seen in other parts of Scripture, where one leader or prophet officially hands over the baton of God's work to the next leader. We see it between Elijah and Elisha – not so much handing over the baton, but handing over the mantle!

Just so, John will be handing over to Jesus. As the herald of Jesus' coming, John's role was to help people to get ready, to be prepared. It is only right that he should baptise Jesus, not because Jesus needed to be baptised, but because of what it represents. The one about whom John had foretold was here!

The river Jordan provides a powerful symbol in itself because it carries so much history. It is the river that the people first crossed to enter the Promised Land, with Joshua, at the end of their wilderness wanderings. And when Elisha took on Elijah's mantle and role, this was also on the bank of the river Jordan. In both stories, Joshua and Elisha part the waters of the Jordan to pass through it. It is a place where God enables acts of power, a place which divides the land of Israel from other nations, unless they need to cross it. Here in the Gospels, it is the place where the Spirit of God descends from heaven like a dove upon Jesus. Another picture – of water and of a dove. We are taken right back to Genesis 1 and the beginning of creation, when the spirit of God hovers over the waters. Then to the story of Noah and the flood, and the dove returning with signs of dry land – of destruction and chaos ending and a new covenant beginning. And so, here, we have this picture of Jesus, holding other ancient pictures within it. As the spirit hovered over the waters at the beginning of time, so Jesus is anointed with God's Spirit, marking the beginning of a new covenant, and a new creation.

And then God's mighty voice, coming down from heaven, announces that Jesus is his son, his beloved, and that he delights in him. In the Psalms, God's voice thunders over the waters of the sea, commanding the waves and stilling chaos. In God's declaration of his son in the waters of the river Jordan, a new act of victory, over chaos, darkness and death is set in motion.

But it's not just the images that speak here, the second thing we need to look at is the significance of Jesus' action in being prepared to be baptised by John. John insists he is not worthy, and yet Jesus tells him this is what they have to do, it is the righteous thing to do. Fulfilling righteousness here is a way of saying 'this is God's will'. It has to happen like this. Jesus was obedient to God's plan, right from the start. And it has to happen, not because Jesus is sinful, or because he needed to be seen to do the right thing. It has to happen, because in coming to earth, in taking human form, in emptying himself, God was identifying with the dirtiness, the ugliness and the sinfulness of human life. And so in his baptism Jesus stands with us in all our sin, our unrighteousness, in all of our pain, confusion, complexity and brokenness, and offers us a way to turn back to God.

Saint Paul sums this up brilliantly in his letter to the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life!"

At Jesus' baptism, God declared him to be his beloved son and he received the gift of God's Holy Spirit. In baptism, **we** are declared to be children of God, and are given a new life and a new identity in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit. But what does that mean for us?

Let's have a look at some of the background to God's declaration, in the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah...

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen, in whom my soul delights.
I have put my spirit upon him
And he will bring forth justice to the nations.
... I have given you as a covenant for the people,
A light to the nations
To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon
From the prison those who sit in darkness.”

It's one of the so-called 'Servant songs' in the second half of Isaiah, which have puzzled scholars and preachers for centuries. Who is the mysterious servant? Some say Israel, some say the prophet (maybe Jeremiah), others say it can only be prophesying about Jesus. The intriguing thing about the prophetic books, though, is that they rarely talk **only** about the future. There is usually a lot of forth-telling to the prophet's contemporary community –speaking truth to power, particularly on issues of social justice – as well as some **fore**-telling. One of the ways in which the prophetic texts are so powerful is that they continue to speak afresh, by God's Spirit, at different times and in very different places. And this allows the text to carry more than one layer of meaning. This speech in Isaiah is set in the context of a court case – trying to make a case for the supremacy of the Lord God over other gods. Isaiah was writing to a community that was battling against temptation to worship other gods, as they saw their neighbours doing. The prophet is trying to turn them back to God, their Creator and Redeemer. God is drawing their attention to something new that he is doing – the beginning of justice being restored to the nations – significantly, not just to Israel but to the whole earth.

This servant he declares as his chosen one, is rather different from other leaders – rather different from Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. He will not cry out or lift up his voice, drawing attention to himself for power or glory. Neither will he break a bruised reed or quench a flickering flame. But he will work tirelessly for justice in all the earth. 'See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare!' The Israelites have been in exile in Babylon, far removed from their home-land, and with no king and a temple in ruins. Isaiah brings them a powerful message of hope, helping them to look forward to what God was doing next. He reminds them that God is the creator of all, that he has called Israel to be a light to the nations. In the hymn that follows our reading, the whole earth rejoices and shouts for joy, giving glory to God.

Isaiah's message of hope spoke again through Jesus and still resonates today.

We are still in the in-between times: we still wait and long for the fulfilment of this promise, of God's plan, of the renewing of the heavens and the earth. We still wait and long for justice to spread over all the earth. We need to hear again the promises that one day darkness will be turned into light and the rough places into level ground. We need reminding to be the light, to

be Christ's hands and feet in the world, standing up for justice even in the small things. In a world where we are often caught up in systems of institutional injustice and corruption, where we are bombarded daily by images of poverty and war in the news, it can seem a far-off vision.

But there is something else in Isaiah's words here, that is worth hearing: we **are** called to be a light to the nations, to bring light to those who sit in darkness; and to set people free with the good news of Jesus Christ. But we are also given the assurance that we will not be discarded or abandoned if the way gets too hard and our efforts or faith become dim like a flickering candle. We have a real encouragement here to watch out for one another along the way – watch out for bruised reeds, that they not be broken. Let us be careful to offer our hands to cup around a flickering candle when that's needed, until it grows stronger again. The king we serve is not a tyrant, but a loving and patient parent. At Jesus' baptism, God calls Jesus his beloved son. Through our baptism, we are also adopted as sons and daughters – and thus brothers and sisters, in Christ. So let us remember our baptism, as we remember Christ's, and hear again the call to turn back to God, and the declaration that we are God's children, through God's son, anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Amen.