

# Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

## Isaiah 43.1-7

### 12<sup>th</sup> January 2025

## Christ's Baptism

### *Introduction to the Theme*

Churches of all traditions seem to love playing with baptistry architecture. Take the font at Salisbury Cathedral, one you'll often see on Songs of Praise. Its ultra-modern design sits happily in a gothic setting as the water in this enormous cross shaped font is filled right to the brim, its meniscus never overflowing. The sheen on this perfectly level surface is mesmerizing. And then there the believer's baptistry in a church at Southend that a group of us visited from AFC when we were considering how we might cover our own baptistry. That baptistry in a recently remodelled church was dug into the very centre of the Sanctuary and covered with thick glass enabling people to walk over it. It was, for that congregation, a central symbol in their sacred space. And, indeed, in our 1962 building, the font, baptistry and communion table is honoured here in the chancel, all edged within an encasing line of brass on the floor.

Today's gospel from Luke is his account of the Baptism of Jesus by his colourful cousin, John the Baptist, in the Jordan river. It seems to be a moment of the deepest dedication for Christ, a moment to say 'yes' to the calling he felt not just from John but from God to be the Lord's Servant.

Ancient Israel had not one, but two expressions of religious washing. The first, practised by some highly devout Jews, was a daily self-washing that we might interpret as daily confession. A time to reflect and repent. So, the daily symbolic washing of the body spoke of a deeper cleansing of the heart and soul. The second type was a one off and practised by gentiles converting to Judaism, a rite of passage signifying the start of a new identity, not one born into but personally chosen.

The fact is that, until John the Baptist comes along, no Jew ever baptises another Jew.

However, something was stirring in the backwaters where John preached. His spiritual message touched a chord with many and drew a crowd.

I remember visiting a coffee shop, in an old Methodist Chapel, overlooking Robin Hood's Bay on the Yorkshire coast and there on the wall was a facsimile entry from John Wesley's diary chronicling his time there in the late 1700's. He wrote: *Preached at 6pm at Robin Hood's Bay – to a good crowd – they responded well. Next morning at 4am preached again to the same crowd before riding on to York. Are you prepared to have another service tomorrow morning? We could even be kind to ourselves and make it six instead of four o'clock!*

Something was stirring in Robin Hood's Bay – all part of what we call The English 18<sup>th</sup> Century Evangelical Revival, as indeed something was stirring during the ministry of John the Baptist. The gospels describe these days favourably, as a time of spiritual enquiry and recommitment. These were days not of dry and dusty religion but of vibrant and personal faith. A time when people seemed to be preparing for a new breaking in of God's Kingdom.

Yet, before we jump ahead of ourselves this morning, in the sermon in a few moments time, I want to ask the question of what made this the right time for Jesus to be baptised. After all, last week we were

still celebrating his birth, and then within seven days the lectionary *time warps* us forward thirty years to his baptism and the start of his public ministry. What, I wonder went on in those silent, unrecorded years, that made the baptism of Jesus by John a reality by chapter 3 of Luke's gospel?

### *Sermon*

The Baptism of Jesus has become such an iconic moment in the story of The Church that it's understandable, especially because the gospels are basically silent on the matter, that we think very little about all that came before. In Jesus' day the average life expectancy was 52, so at 30 years of age Jesus wasn't really considered then as young as we might view him today. In his culture, aged 30, probably the age of his baptism, a very significant part of his life was already behind him. And it was that life, that lived experience, which surely had brought him to his baptism that day in the Jordan.

Now, there is a story I probably use too much in sermons but it's because I value its lesson. It's the incident Desmond Tutu told of the day he was out shopping with his mum, as a boy growing up in Soweto. They passed a priest in the street, a white priest serving in the township, and the priest, whose name was Trevor Huddleston, raised his hat as he said *good morning* to Mrs Tutu. As a boy Desmond Tutu had never seen a white man treat his mother with so much respect, and – he says – it was Trevor Huddleston's courtesy which planted a seed in his young mind that one day he too wanted to become a priest. Such a 'small' incident in a young boy's life, yet one, that arguably, changed history – for without the doffing of that hat we might never have had the dancing, laughing bishop whose courage, integrity and vision made the world a better place.

Our past filters through to our present. What, I wonder, had made Jesus into the man who that day willingly came for John's baptism?

I suspect the influence of his home had much to do with it. Both his own family, and John's, we are told, seem very conscious of the stirrings of God in their lives. These families give us two of the most significant songs in the Bible as from John's father we hear the Benedictus, and for Jesus' mother, the Magnificat.

All Jewish families were encouraged to value and live by the Torah and to teach its truths to their children, and their children's children. I suspect Elizabeth and Mary, Zachariah and Joseph did just that. So John and Jesus would have been cousins united in an upbringing in which faith played a big part, was spoken of often and taught by tradition and example.

And, in the one incident from Jesus' childhood that is recorded, namely his visit to the Temple when the whole of Nazareth seems to be on pilgrimage, we also sense the importance of faith in his community. It bound family to family as they attended Synagogue together, celebrated bar mitzvahs in each other's homes and even looked after each other's children when visiting Jerusalem.

Us Christians would do well to recognise and respect the essential Jewishness of Jesus. It was his tradition, and he grows in it as it shapes him. In fact, he spent the whole of his life within its supportive framework, even the night before his death celebrating Passover with his disciples in the Upper Room.

Towards the end of last year, it was our great privilege to welcome, at two separate services, families to church for either a service of Infant Blessing or Infant Baptism. These were moments of such joy and delight and one, which I think, showed a certain courage on the part of the mums and dads. For in such an increasingly and aggressively secular age it does take conviction to bring your child to church for such a service, especially if you also make this an opportunity to invite a cohort of your friends – as our two couples did. A Blessing or a Baptism says that faith is important to our family, as is church. Faith and church are celebrated as positives and concepts worth cherishing and passing

on. We look back at those two services, I think, with much gratitude and joy.

As perhaps we do our own formation in church, Sunday School, youth group or home. A time when we were introduced to faith. Or maybe it came later and through other experiences. The point is this, behind every baptism or confirmation is a story, our story which leads us to a moment of commitment.

Now, I'm conscious too that Jesus' baptism, because it is also part of the John the Baptist narrative, has a radical side to it. It's out of the ordinary and perhaps to many, both Romans and Jews, Jesus in being baptised in this way was aligning himself with the *awkward squad!* So, why did he identify so publicly with John's radical message?

His cousin, The Baptist, dressed theatrically and must have sounded like an Old Testament prophet with his call for the nation to repent and prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. Significantly he did all of this in the lower Jordan Valley, on the western side of the Dead Sea in the Judean Wilderness, not in Jerusalem or at the Temple where his priestly father ministered. I wonder how that went down? John was probably more radical than his parents and might even have become part of an Essene Community living an ascetic life and looking forward to the arrival of God's Servant.

So, even though John, through his priestly heritage, was familiar with all the ritual of the temple, he found God more in the desert than in a building.

In preparing this sermon which focuses on Jesus' baptism I've been reflecting this week on my own, now fifty years ago in November 1974 when I was 13. Our church had been relocated and rebuilt, so the five of us baptised that Sunday evening were the first ever to use the baptistry. I remember it as such a joy-filled moment for us all and for the congregation. We'd moved into the building that spring and it was super. Everything brand new and usable, so unlike the old, tatty chapel we had left. Yet, you know, I think the building sort of came alive for the congregation that autumn evening as the baptistry was filled and five of us from the Bible Class were baptised. At that moment it was as if the new church found its heartbeat and came alive, infused not just by mere ritual but by transformative faith. Maybe it was our own radical moment of dedication.

Jesus, initially at least, seems to be inspired by John's ministry and wants to affirm John's message of repentance – and so is baptised by him.

What, I wonder, led Jesus to identify with this radical interpretation of John's faith and tradition?

Because his public ministry only lasted a brief three years, we think Jesus was probably a carpenter for far longer than he was a preacher. It would be traditional for him to follow in his father's profession and Joseph was a *Tekton*, that's Greek for a craftsman carpenter or stone mason. Historians ponder if Joseph and Jesus ran a workshop in Nazareth, a settlement in their day of 400 people, and maybe they also worked, along with hundreds of other craftsmen, at Sephoris. Sephoris was an hours walk from Nazareth and became the capital of Galilee under Herod who had it rebuilt to house tens of thousands during Jesus' adolescent years.

So maybe it was in Sephoris that Jesus met the world, encountered both Romans and Jews. Saw temples to pagan gods erected as well as synagogues being built. And maybe too, if Joseph dies during these silent years of the gospel, Jesus knew the tremendous burden of taking over as the primary provider for Mary's family. He would have witnessed the injustice of huge wealth being spent on Sephoris, described by Herod as the Ornament of Galilee, whilst his own family in Nazareth lived at subsistence level on the margins.

These jigsaw pieces of his early life are mere conjecture but there is surely some credence to the idea

that if his home life gave him his faith, maybe his work life sharpened that and gave his faith a cutting edge based in the injustices he saw around him, making him – just like John – a radical, and that day by the Jordan, he wanted to publicly identify with a message that touched both the head and the heart and so he was baptised.

And so the moment of dedication, this sacrament of commitment arrives and as Jesus goes into the water, under the water and then up out of the water it's as if his past, present and future are being blended together. A Kairos Moment, the right moment to make a decision.

Luke gives us an unforgettable image in chapter three. What's important isn't its historicity but what it means and says in the life of our Lord. Jesus responds. John baptises and God blesses. And this benediction is drawn from the Coronation Service of Jewish Kings when the monarch is blessed with words *You are my beloved Son, or Servant*. So, Luke puts these words into the narrative so that the baptism is likened to the beginning of a reign, God's reign of love and service focussed on the ministry of his beloved Son.

Now I know they will not be quite as dramatic as this, but such moments still come our way today. Kairos Moments when there is such a coming together that we sense somehow God is prompting and leading us forward. People tell me of how Work Aid was formed here at AFC in the Sycamore Hall, of how LunchBreak started with that desire to open our doors every Tuesday and be a place of welcome to the community, of the way the Child Contact Centre emerged as a piece of wonderful social ministry in a hurting world. And I guess if you were in at the start of any of those organisations you might have said something like *it's great how it's all come together and we just sense God is behind it*. And maybe you've had such times in your own, personal life when you sense a jigsaw has been put together and you see a new picture in your life beckoning you forward and you sense there is something of God about it all, and your heart is warmed by that.

I wonder if maybe Jesus recalled his baptism and that sense of being God's *beloved* at the tough moments that were before him, whether in the Wilderness or in Gethsemane.

The baptism of Jesus has been our theme today. That moment of radical dedication shown by Jesus as he commences his ministry to show us more of God's love and light.

I love a story told by the Vice Provost of Washington National Cathedral on her return from a mission trip to South America. Along with her team she visited a church in a poor part of town and as it was Advent they spoke of the nativity and all the gifts brought to the baby Jesus either by shepherds or magi and asked the children to draw a picture of what they might give to the Christchild. She told her Washington congregation of one little girl's drawing. It startled her initially for the girl had simply drawn two babies in the manger. So, *tell me what's going on in your picture*, she asked the little girl who responded: *Well, my family is poor so I've got nothing to give to Jesus, but I could crawl into the manger and keep him warm by lying next to him, I could give myself to Jesus*.

What a wonderful reply, what a wonderful gift – the essence of baptism and discipleship – as the little girl said, I could give myself to Jesus...can we?

May it be so in the name of Jesus who so lovingly gave himself to us.

Amen