

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 10th January 2021
The Baptism of Christ

Collect

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognize him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Sermon

I wonder when you last went to a baptism. Probably quite a while ago now, what with the year that has just passed. Probably, though, you can remember baptisms here at St. Mary's in our main services, as well as baptisms that you have been invited to by family and friends.

As you think about baptisms that you have attended, think carefully about the different symbols that are used in the baptism service. There is water – we might think of that as the key moment in the baptism service. Here at St. Mary's the water is poured onto the person's head, whereas some other churches prefer full immersion. What is important, though, is the use of water. It is a sign of being made clean. Part of our understanding of baptism is a sense of turning away from wrongdoing and towards goodness. When we baptise infants it is an aspiration, and parents and godparents make promises to try to guide the child in the right paths. And we all know that, while baptism only happens once, throughout our lives we will have to remind ourselves to make good choices; to seek that which is good; to turn away from that which is not. Yet the symbol of cleansing water is important.

What you notice here at St. Mary's – even if it's only because at the time of baptism we all have to turn around – is that the font is near the entrance of the church. This isn't a mistake. It is a sign that baptism marks the beginning of our faith journey. And there is also importance in the fact that during the baptism service we move from the west end of the church where the baptism takes place towards the east end. As you know, churches are aligned so that the sanctuary end points towards the east, reminding us of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, to our east.

If you have been to many baptism services, you will probably recognise that there are different practices in different churches. During the service, those being baptised are signed with the sign of the cross. In a sense, they are "claimed" for Christ through this action. It's all symbolic, of course, and we know that every human being is a child of God, but sometimes it is so important to recognise things symbolically. In some places this signing is done with oil. After the baptism there is another anointing, this time with the oil of chrism, which symbolises the sign and seal of the Holy Spirit. We know from the story that John the Baptist offered a baptism of repentance – of turning away from evil and turning our lives around. Christian baptism includes an understanding that we receive the gift of God's spirit through which our lives may be transformed.

At the end of the baptism service those who have been baptised receive a candle, a sign of the light of Christ, with the proclamation that they are to walk in that light all the days of their lives. Again, the suggestion throughout the service is of a movement from darkness into light – and in some churches lighting will be used to show this clearly. With infant baptism, we may be familiar with christening robes. Sometimes these are passed down through generations whereas some choose to buy a new garment – each has its symbolism. You may have heard of services where those baptised actually changed clothes during the service (and not just those who have to because they have been fully immersed.) Again, the symbolism here is of transformation in our lives through baptism.

While I know that some of you have visited the Holy Land, and have probably renewed your baptismal vows either at Lake Galilee or in the river Jordan, I imagine that when I asked you to remember baptism services that you have been to, I expect that not many of them were like the one described here in Mark's gospel. Yet, just as there is rich and important symbolism throughout our

baptism services, so we need to pay close attention to the symbolism here to notice what might matter for us about the Baptism of Christ.

Our reading begins by introducing John the Baptist. We know that Mark's gospel is the shortest, and therefore to the point. When I say that John is introduced, we are simply told that he appeared in the wilderness. Sometimes it can be helpful to have Luke's account as well, which tells us that John was the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, conceived in their old age, and that Mary spent a significant time with Elizabeth while they were both pregnant. Indeed Luke suggests a deep connection between John and Jesus, Elizabeth's baby having leapt in her womb at Mary's arrival.

What Mark points out is that John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And it seems to have caught on because people are coming to John from across Judea, confessing their sins and being baptised.

John is absolutely clear about one thing. While he is clearly entirely committed to offering a baptism of repentance, he knows that his purpose is to prepare the way for Jesus. When he speaks of Jesus, all he has to say is that in comparison he himself is unworthy. And his belief is that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

And so it is that Jesus comes to John at the river Jordan to be baptised. Again, other gospel accounts suggest that John initially felt this task to be beyond him, whereas Mark offers the story at its briefest. And yet, for all its brevity, we must not miss the extraordinary. That while John is under know illusion about his unworthiness, Jesus is completely sure that he is going to be baptised by John. Just like all those others who have decided that they need to turn their lives around.

Just as John predicts that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit, so when Jesus himself is baptised, the Holy Spirit comes upon him, declaring those extraordinary words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

On the surface, the baptism of Jesus may not be very like our own. And there is great richness in the symbolism we use during baptismal services. Yet in this stripped down baptism by John at the river Jordan we remember something of great importance. And it is perhaps what lies at the heart of baptism. Because baptism is really all about belonging. It is about the extraordinary truth that we are all children of God. Each one of us unique.

And that we are called to belong to God and one another. Just as Jesus chose to belong by being baptised by John, so we are called to be part of something bigger than ourselves. In the past year we have probably discovered more than ever before that it simply isn't possible to live out our Christian lives in isolation. And so we have found ways to make sure that we continue to be together, even while we are told that we must not mix socially.

It hasn't been easy, but we have found ways to do it because, just as Jesus knew that his life was lived for and with others, so we also know that at the heart of our uniqueness there is also a togetherness. Without one another, the extraordinary gifts that we have been given – those things with which God is indeed well pleased – are really worth very little. Because it is in our belonging – to one another and to God – that we really do see ourselves, and thereby the world, transformed.

Amen