

Sunday 9th January 2022

Baptism of Christ – The First Sunday of Epiphany

Gospel Reading: Luke 3.15 – 17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Other Readings:

Old Testament Isaiah 43.1-7

Israel's Only Saviour

43 But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.
⁴ Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
⁶ I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—

⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

New Testament - Acts 8.14-17

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶ (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Homily

In today's Gospel we read: 'All the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the messiah.'

We may recognise the feeling of expectation at this time. Perhaps we look for those in leadership to make what we consider the correct decision about Covid regulations? We may long for a return to normality and freedom from regulations or the threat of disease?

Did John feel the pressure of this expectation? It was a big ask after all. Were those surrounding John disappointed that their expectations were not met?

We celebrate the baptism of Christ in Epiphany, as it makes up one of the great moments of revealing to the world the true nature of Jesus. These are moments when the true nature of Jesus is revealed to the world. In today's reading we heard of when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and we heard the voice of God the Father speak; a moment of realization and revelation, a moment of epiphany to the world.

We know that baptism needs water. Here in Britain, we can have water in abundance, more water can often mean disaster, pain, and difficulty. Yet in the ancient Middle-East, water meant life and still does today. Its symbolic meaning as life giving, has shaped our baptism, our faith. In baptism we are washed in the waters of new life. Water and life go hand in hand.

When Jesus appeared from the river Jordan, he was revealed to be the anointed, the Messiah, and as such he was destined to enter the deep waters of both life and of death. The Epiphany is a celebration of how Jesus is a light to the world, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people. Yet the redemption Jesus will bring must be won through suffering. For that redemption to be won, Christ must suffer on the cross.

In being baptised by John, Jesus was joining in with a community of faith, supporting his cousin perhaps, but importantly Jesus was leading by example - it is a good way to lead. The Baptist called for the people to be cleansed in preparation for the coming Messiah.

Jesus took up the prophet's demand that the people should wash themselves and through the life-giving waters of baptism, seek justice in a fairer society. Jesus calls, then and today, to new life, living in the hope that God fulfils His promise to make us more humane and compassionate through water and the spirit.

John could not carry this responsibility. Perhaps John's disciples and the community surrounding him were disappointed, but it was never John's role to be the Messiah. The baptism of Jesus by John is part of John's story of how he makes way for the Christ, the one who would bear the burdens - the only one who could bear the burdens, the only one who could bring salvation. In Matthew's Gospel we read, 'Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light'.

Bearing our burdens, bringing salvation is something only the One who is both fully human and fully divine could ever hope to achieve.

Amen.

Conversation Questions

1. What fair/unfair expectations might we have of our leaders?
2. What examples of life-giving water are you thankful for?
3. How could we, like John, 'make way for Christ' this week?
4. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
5. What will you do this week in your daily lives in response to what you have heard today?
#everydayfaith

Prayer

Run through your day so far and think about the role water has already played in it. Imagine touching it, drinking it, splashing it, washing in it. Spend some time in silence, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

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

Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, material from which is incorporated in this service paper, is copyright © The Archbishops' Council, 2000. Scripture passage from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised) copyright © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.