

## **The Baptism of Christ – Sunday 12 January 2025**

**Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17,21-22**

### **A Sermon by the Rev. Jackie Bullen**

A few years ago I went on a pilgrimage to revisit the church where I was baptised. I had not been to the place for over 40 years. At the time, my family were dairy farmers and we lived a mile from the church at the top of a hill. Like many children of my age, I was Christened when I was 6 weeks old wearing a Christening gown that had been used for my older sister.

It was a strange feeling to enter this building where once I had been brought. Strange too to run my hand around the font – a substantial, circular and beautiful font made of solid stone – and to know that here my Christian life began. Although I was unaware of what was happening at the time, here my parents and my godparents had stood and made for me the Christian promises, here the priest had washed me with the baptismal water, and here with my saviour Christ I had started off on my spiritual journey.

Isaiah's words in today's reading applied to me:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you.”

The feeling that welled up in me, as I stood where my parents had stood, was thanksgiving. Thanks to my parents for bringing me there that day, thanks to Christ for leading me on my journey and despite my shortcomings allowing me to grow in faith as his child and a member of his Church, and in time to hear his call.

I wonder how many of us have visited the place we were baptised?

For some of us it may be a well-known place, perhaps a church with which we have had a continued connection through our lives; or perhaps for some of us it was a recent event well within memory, perhaps even here in this church, at this font. Or perhaps some of us have no knowledge of the place and have never been back to discover it.

The act of being baptised is something available to us all and today, the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, is a good day to reflect on the experience of what happens at a Christening service for those present, as we explore what happened when Jesus was baptised.

St Luke, in today's gospel, has set the scene. John the Baptist has withdrawn from the town out into the wilderness. There he proclaims a baptism of repentance. On the bank of the river Jordan he has gathered a crowd attracted by his teaching who are moved to sorrow for their sins. He baptises them as they confess their sins. They wonder if he is indeed the long-awaited Messiah, but he says "I baptise 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 baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Then Jesus comes and takes his place in the unfolding story.

Other gospel writers describe what happens when John meets Jesus. The Fourth Gospel describes John's awe: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"; St Matthew's gospel on the other hand points to the awkwardness of the encounter, as John says: "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"

How can it be that Jesus, the sinless one, should come to John for a baptism of repentance? There is something that feels strange to us about Jesus without sin being baptised among sinners, and yet this is no less surprising than God making his home here among us. No less challenging to us than the sinless Jesus being crucified among thieves.

And then, as Jesus prays, heaven is opened, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove and a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

All four gospels are agreed that Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan marked the beginning of his public ministry. His birth at Bethlehem was the moment of his incarnation, when the Word became flesh. But his baptism marks his coming out, when he was, as it were, commissioned by the Father to take on his calling as our Saviour.

Jesus also knew his baptism to be supremely important.

Later, when he was teaching in the temple, the chief priests asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" and Jesus said to them, "The baptism of John – was it from heaven or of human origin?" It was to John that Jesus looked back for the source of his authority: to the baptism of repentance, the prophetic lifestyle, the wilderness and those words from heaven "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

We read, that Jesus' baptism was immediately followed by a spiritual battle. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the

devil, there to prove himself and to test the authority which he had been given, fighting with the material temptations of food, money and power, wrestling with his call from God.

So the authority bestowed on Jesus at his baptism had to be assumed, defended and battled over, a struggle which undergirded his ministry of reconciliation, and a struggle which he carried with him to the cross.

Of course, our personal baptism is not like that of Jesus, since we are baptised into his death and resurrection. That is why we renew our baptismal vows at Easter. We have been incorporated into him in the community of his Church.

However, being baptised brings us some responsibility and at the same time bestows on us some authority. We may wish to reflect in what ways being baptised affects our lifestyle. Is being a Christian going to make us more concerned for justice, peace and the integrity of creation? Is our love for Christ going to affect the way we spend our money?

Just as Jesus rose from the water praying, and wrestled in the wilderness in prayer, so it is for us. Our baptism gives us authority to pray, and to wrestle in prayer. If we call ourselves “practising Christians”, we do so because we pray. I came across this wonderful quote from Brother William Sirr, an early Anglican Franciscan brother:

“Prayer is, as it were, opening the windows of the soul to let in the sunshine of the love of God which is already streaming down from heaven. The more windows we open, and the longer we keep them open, the more of the sunshine we shall let in.”

We need to keep our prayer life in good repair, to be as methodical about it as suits our personality; to experiment with different and new ways of praying; and to pray for the people who surround us and the circumstances of our present world.

Do not belittle your baptism, whether it happened without your knowledge in your infancy, or in your adolescence, or in your maturity. By our baptism we are all united with Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

May we never forget the authority and responsibility we are given in His name.