

Sermon – Baptism of Christ: Matthew 3:13-17 – January 2020

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

The Christian tradition of baptism begins here in Matthew chapter three – an adaptation of the Jewish practice of washing oneself from impurity.

To have a Messiah baptised to be cleansed from sin of the world – could be seen as a huge embarrassment to the Christian movement – it's hard to think that the early church would make up such a thing – it is for this reason that we can assume that Jesus would have been baptised in this way by John.....

From early Christianity, waters of Baptism have held great symbolic meaning. Candidates underwent an intense process of prayerful, practical preparation sometimes lasting for years and were immersed naked in a natural source of water, being washed in water and reborn in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was a joyous communal experience – everyone had a role – bishop, clergy, neighbours, friends and family.

An early Church Father called Tertullian observed that 'Christ (was) never without water'.

In Genesis we hear how 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ... And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light.'

From the beginning, the Spirit of God was bringing life and light to the world through water and through the Word – and God said...

Water was the first element to bring forth swarms of living creatures – even before the earth brought forth living creatures of every kind...

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit ordinary water 'took on the ability to make holy'. Water is one way in which God relates to humans and when we find water mingled with the Spirit of God, we find freedom.

The Israelites had been set free from captivity in Egypt by God bringing them through the water of the Red Sea. There we witness the powerful combination of the Word of God that instructed Moses meeting the water of salvation in the Red Sea.

God leads his people to the waters – to the spiritual waters of freedom as they repent and turn away from their old ways. God calls by name because he loves them – loves us

And in Matthew's Gospel, with everything prepared by John - the Word and the water come together again, and as Jesus – the Word made flesh – is baptised in the water of the Jordan - in bodily form like a dove descending, Heaven and earth meet as the Spirit of God says through heavens opened, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Despite John's protestations that Jesus didn't need his baptism of repentance and forgiveness for sins he doesn't have – Jesus insists – a contrast of Jesus insisting to be baptised and cleansed when he didn't need to – and the Pharisees and Sadducees refusal to repent when they so needed to....

But God is truly with us – in the thick of the mess – he is out there getting hands and feet dirty – Jesus is no other messenger but God himself living out a human experience, in a human way, bringing a divine touch of heaven to earth. No condemnation here – just mercy in the acknowledgement of the sin of the world – and forgiveness and acceptance and a hope-bringing opportunity to turn back and put things right. Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us

The words are similar to those in Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him." They are for everyone who is in his presence – a message to them from God. Jesus is giving God's seal of approval to it all and the spirit of baptism would descend on all who would follow him into the water of eternal life.

The baptism of Jesus was more about bearing witness to God's good presence in creation, bringing humanity and divinity – heaven and earth - together in the Incarnation, as God's spirit hovers over the darkness of the waters of life to bring light to the world through Christ.

Through Jesus – freedom through water is coming again, but not in the way the Jews expected in armies and battles won but in victories over human brokenness, injustice, sickness and all the darkness of the world.

This is a challenge for us – to stay rooted in the goodness of God's creation – to call it forth by our belief of it and our demand for it – even when we are confronted with pictures of people starving before our eyes – others killing their own family in the name of a warped ideology of faith – of the greed, power and injustice that prevents a fair and basic human living standard being available to all...

Jesus might have met the sinners in solidarity through his baptism, yet the bodily form of the Spirit descending upon him sets this ordinary man from Galilee apart from the rest. This man Jesus has the seal of approval of heaven – he is nothing less than the offspring of God.

From this moment, Jesus' mission-journey as the Son of God had begun – baptism for Jesus is about national and global renewal – that begins with personal renewal – change of heart and mind one person at a time.

With each step we see the symbolic significance of the baptismal waters. We witness it at the wedding at Cana when he performs his first miracle, turning water into wine, offering a cup of water to a neighbour, refreshing his strength at the well-side, walking on water and crossing it at will, using water as an act of service as he washes the feet of the disciples and - referring to Mark's Gospel account of Christ's passion - we see Pilate washing his hands of it all and finally, at the darkest hour, when he is pierced, water gushing out from his side, we can see how it all comes full circle as both in baptism and in dying the prayers of Jesus, mingled with water, open the heavens for God and man to become reconciled – united – to become one....

Jesus' baptism sets the scene for all who repent and are baptized to know that they too are empowered by the Spirit through him to become God's agents for change – for a new

world that embodies communal qualities of love for God, for one another and for God's creation.

So what does the baptism of Jesus tell us about our own baptism? How do we stay in the joy and freedom of Christ's baptism knowing that a few months down the line we will symbolically be kneeling bereft at the foot of the cross with his mother Mary as we follow the life and death of Jesus?

Well, as St Paul says, 'All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...but if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him'

Even within all the brokenness of the world, we can live in trust that we really can live out Christ's resurrected life if we too are prepared to die with him and for him - and pray to him in order to be reborn in the peace and hope of the eternal spirit of life and truth, and furthermore, we can pass this good news on to others in word and deed in places and situations where Christ's loving action is needed..

So for now, as we live as part of the overarching story of God's people on the road to heavenly salvation and ultimate freedom that Jesus Christ opens up for us through his baptism, we can accept again the invitation offered by God through the words of Isaiah to 'Fear not...'

God loves us all the same and calls humanity to that new heaven and earth where we will be free to receive God's water, 'the gift from the spring of the water of life – flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb, Jesus Christ.' (Rev 21,22)

Baptism is a sacrament – an outward action of an inward grace – with Jesus the ultimate sacrament. Baptism is a welcome-home given to us by a loving God through who cares about our peace.

At some point during the days ahead, spend a few moments thinking of God's love for his Son and what was said to Jesus as he prayed after his baptism - say it quietly to yourself – 'You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' Then perhaps you might want to imagine God speaking to you – individually - and say it again, this time with your name in front, and reflect quietly on God's love for you and how God is telling *you* to 'Fear not – for I have redeemed you, I have called *you* by name – you are mine....' Amen