



First Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 10 January 2021

READINGS

Genesis 1: 1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

Baptism of Christ

Good morning friends. Today we commemorate the baptism of Christ. We considered this theme on the Third Sunday of Advent when we were looking at the theme for that day, the relationship between Jesus and John. Jesus' baptism by John, at least in the Synoptic tradition, is in many ways, central to the relationship between Jesus and John. So let us briefly considering this again.

If you recall, we saw how each of the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke differed in their record of Jesus' baptism. The different accounts betray the controversy surrounding the issue. Mark, the older of the three, and therefore probably more historically reliable, tells us plainly that:

"Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." (Mark 1:9)

Luke subtly avoids the hot potato by not specifying who Jesus was baptised by:

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened" (Luke 3:21)

And in an attempt to justify Jesus' baptism by John, but in a way that only highlights its controversy, Matthew imagines a dialogue between them where John has to be persuaded as to the necessity of Jesus' baptism in order "to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).

Jesus' baptism was a theological hot potato for the Gospel writers because it was meant as a baptism of repentance from sin. Orthodox doctrine of the early Church would later vehemently uphold Jesus' sinlessness. Therefore, if Jesus was sinless, why was he required to receive a baptism meant to cleanse one from sin? Underlying the sort-of surface presentation presented in the Synoptics is perhaps a more mundane and real-to-life situation – Jesus was initially John the Baptist's disciple. (The fact of Jesus' baptism by John is almost indisputable – the criterion of embarrassment states that potentially embarrassing data relating to Jesus included in the Gospels is likely to be factual, or it would not have been included. In other words, the writers would never have made up information about Jesus, which was potentially embarrassing). Baptism also in the Ancient Near East conveyed discipleship and, in all likelihood, there was a time when, even in the minds of Jesus and John themselves, Jesus was thought of as subordinate to John.

So is this all the baptism of Jesus conveys – a potentially embarrassing detail for the record of the Gospel writers? Obviously not. There is another far more positive implication, associated with the theophany which accompanies Jesus' baptism. What is of interest is that the same theophany occurs twice within the Synoptic narrative, once at the baptism of Jesus and once at the Transfiguration. In the context of the Transfiguration, is also attested to by the writer of 2 Peter, who claims to have been an "eye-witness" of the event.

What then is the substance of the theophany? It is both a revelation and an affirmation of the Sonship of Jesus. Regardless of which Gospel account one considers, and whether you are looking at the Baptism or the Transfiguration, the first words uttered from heaven affirm Jesus' Sonship: "This is/you are my Son."

Some biblical scholars have suggested that the record of both theophanies may be traced back to a single revelation in the life of the historical Jesus – that which takes place at the transfiguration, as this is attested to outside of the Synoptic tradition, but that the Gospel writers nevertheless felt it necessary to attach the same, or a similar, theophanic event to the baptism of Jesus. In considering that the substance of this is an affirmation of Jesus' Sonship, one can see the logic behind this. And certainly, from within an ecclesial or liturgical context, this should be our own departure point since what the baptism and the revelation of Jesus' Sonship communicate to us is nothing short of remarkable and miraculous.

This is, in fact, largely the import and point of the incarnation (and ministry) of Jesus, for our own lives, which is namely that when we receive baptism in the Church, the exact same words uttered to Jesus from heaven two thousand years ago, are uttered to you and me: "You are my son/my daughter, with you I am well pleased." Being a Sacramental Church, we also uphold the unfailing efficacy of the Sacraments, meaning that, in the context of baptism, from the day of your baptism onwards, you were made a child of God and nothing in this world can ever change that. Therefore, this Christmastide, as we continue to bask in the glory of the incarnate one, may God enfold you and those you care for, in the knowledge his unfailing love.

Amen