



First Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



8 January 2023

READINGS

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-17.

Baptism of Christ

I think Baptism is one of the most misunderstood sacraments of the Christian church. It's a sort of rite of passage for small babies, and there is the same fuss made as is made for a wedding. For most people it's about clothes, presents, lots of photos, and often a party afterwards, and then life is back to normal. Even committed Christians know it's necessary but don't really get it other than to think they are giving the baby to God so it will have a blessed life and church to belong to. I know we give baptism classes and it's all explained, but is it actually understood?

Today's Gospel doesn't clarify it for us either, partly because it has some significant differences. But let's first look at what baptism means and why it has become such an important part of our religious life. Cleansing from sin and healing have been part of human culture since humanity began to understand life as more than just survival. Ritual bathing is still part of many religions, and those of us who travel will know that for the Hindus, the river Ganges in India is a sacred river, a manifestation of a goddess who will bring healing, forgiveness, and a reversal of negative Karma for those who bathe in her. Judaism, out of which Christianity grew, has many bathing rituals. The mikvah, a bath which women have to take once a month is one such example. Washing hands before eating is another. In fact, the celebrant in our own services echoes this in the hand-washing before consecrating the bread and wine at communion. Frequent bathing rituals were part of Judaism. The purpose was always cleansing, spiritual cleansing, and often healing as well. In other words, the wholeness of the human being was something seen as good, as desired of God and the various cleansing rituals, mostly involving water, were endemic to practising observant Judaism.

The ministry of John the Baptist was working within that tradition. While not unknown, public repentance was not a regular part of religious life, and Yom Kippur which is the Day of Atonement includes Fasting, not baptism. Baptism is sometimes part of the Jewish tradition for those who convert to Judaism. They are baptised to wash away their previous beliefs, and into their new religion. But John the Baptist's work is different. As we are feeling that, after three years under the shadow of Covid, 2023 feels a little more promising – and please God let that be so – so John, in fulfilling his own calling, knew that the Messiah was to come and his ministry was a looking forward from within the oppression of Roman rule to the promise of a liberated future under God. His call was to repentance and cleansing so that when God's anointed one was manifest, the people would be ready for him, would recognise him, and be in a place where they could follow him.

So when Jesus arrived for baptism, it rather put a spanner in the works. Jesus didn't need repentance and healing, and John makes this clear. The explosive nature of his response in the original Greek is lost in

translation. Here was not upper class gentleman making a suggestion: "Oh Jesus, this is not really the right thing, you know. Actually you should baptize me?" it was more in the line of "No ways am I baptizing you. Are you crazy! You should baptize me?" But Jesus insisted, and John, probably feeling very stupid, did as he was told. God used this occasion, and it appeared to all watching that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit in the form of a Dove, and God's voice was heard calling Jesus God's "son" in whom God was well pleased. "Son" in Middle eastern idiom did not only mean legal or biological child, but also meant an image of the father. God calling Jesus "my son", meant God recognized Jesus as part of Godself. No question, this was he of whom John had been preaching and preparing, and we say that Jesus' ministry began here.

Even so, John was not out of line. Jesus was without sin, and as God's chosen one, what was he doing getting himself baptized as a repentant sinner? Here we have more evidence of Emmanuel, God with us, which we emphasise during Christmas. Jesus was making himself one with us. Even in our sin, he is there alongside us, taking on the sinners' identity so that we might be forgiven, healed, and restored in our relationship to God, and this was vindicated by the presence of the Holy Spirit at this baptism. His ministry began as it would end. He subjected himself to human control, and in so doing, brought us up out of our darkness and sin into the resurrected life which enables us to be bearers of the Holy Spirit.

And we, all of whom have been baptized, share in this ministry of God. While there are many that feel we should only be baptized as adults when we are old enough to make our own decisions, we are aware of that, and confirmation is the time when we take on the promises made on our behalf at baptism and take on the responsibility as part of the body of Christ. But our baptism as babies is justified when our parents bring us into the life of the church when we are small and promise that we will imbibe Christian values as members of that body while we are at our most impressionable. As a piece of another plant is grafted onto a tree to make it stronger and increase its fruit, so we graft these little ones into our part of the body of Christ. If we care for them and bring them up so that Christ is able to nurture them, then the graft takes and becomes part of the tree, we grow a stronger body with the added person, and the church thrives.

But while our formal baptism is a once-off, we do need constant cleansing and humbling of ourselves and repentance and forgiveness and starting over. As we wash ourselves daily, so we need to wash our souls just as regularly, because in Christ we are called to serve God and our fellow human beings in building up the kingdom of God, and sin prevents so much being done. Now is a good time to remember that, and to make some plan to be more constant about our devotion to God.

So we start again with a new year. We look back and see that the last three years has brought out both the best and the worst in us. Let us humble ourselves and take all those ugly parts of us which floated to the surface during this stressful time, and ask God to forgive us and cleanse us and make us new. And as we go into the new year and start again with work and all those obligations that keep us occupied, let us look back at the good things we did over the last three years. Let us see in them gifts of God which God used then and can use again to build up the kingdom, make our society cleansed and ethical and efficient, and let us give them to God to use as God wills. As Jesus humbled himself as God wanted, so let us humble ourselves and make ourselves subject to God who really needs committed friends.

We will renew our baptismal vows at Easter, so we won't go there now, but I'd like to end with something a bit out of the ordinary. Every year at around this time the Methodists commit themselves to God again in a covenant drawn up by John Wesley where the congregation commits themselves again to God. I'd like to read a slightly altered version of these words. In the light of how Jesus commits himself to us, I think it's acceptable that we think along those lines, and listen to this rather demanding promise. Can we commit

ourselves as wholeheartedly to what God asks of us? Dare we stand at the beginning of the year and put ourselves so wholly into the hand of God, particularly after the demands of the last three years?

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing,

put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you,

or laid aside for you,

exalted for you,

or brought low for you;

let me be full,

let me be empty,

let me have all things,

let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And I acknowledge that all will only be accomplished.

In the power of the Holy Spirit which, by grace, enables me to make this undertaking.