

Today in the church year is the Baptism of Jesus, which we always celebrate on this, the first Sunday after the Epiphany. The Baptism of our Lord is that auspicious occasion when our Lord Jesus Christ just before he was about to start his public ministry, was baptised by John in the River Jordan, and the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, confirming Jesus as God's own beloved Son, with whom he was well pleased. And so every year on this day the Holy Gospel is the account of Jesus' baptism, as we have it in either Matthew Mark or Luke depending on the year. This year it's the account in St Luke, reading especially these verses – “Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”

But today's reading is prefaced with some words from John the Baptist about the Christ and what he will do, particularly these words: “He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

So taking these two sections together we find that Jesus was not only baptised himself by John but also that he will do some baptising of his own: he will baptise us. We are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

We start with Jesus himself being baptised. It says all the

people were being baptised. That would be all the people who were coming out to John the Baptist in the Wilderness, to hear his preaching and to be baptised by him. John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's what makes Jesus being baptised a little strange: because Jesus had nothing to repent of, he had no sins that needed to be forgiven. Nevertheless, he too is baptised. What's going on here?

This is Jesus identifying with us poor sinners. He, the sinless Son of God come in the flesh, comes to bear our sins and suffer the judgement we deserve. This he will do on the cross. So even here, at his baptism, Jesus begins the journey that will take him to the cross. He identifies himself as one of us and is baptised with us.

Then having been baptised, and while Jesus is praying, three things happen: the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends and the voice comes from heaven. Each part is significant.

The heavens are opened. This means that here in Christ's baptism there is a passage between heaven and earth. There is open access. No barrier. God is going to do something. What will it be?

The heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus- "in bodily form like a dove" it says. Why just this? This remarkable manifestation of the Holy Spirit has a lot to say about who Jesus is and what he came to do. The descent of this dove speaks much about the person and the works of Christ.

You might ask why Jesus needs the Holy Spirit coming

upon him. After all, Jesus is the very Son of God, the second person of the Trinity; already in perfect communion with the Holy Spirit from eternity. But remember that this is the Son of God now come in the flesh in human form. He is both true God and true man; and so we can say that according to his human nature Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit after his baptism which is pretty much what the reading says in the book of Acts when Peter and John visit Samaria.

In his baptism, Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit to empower him for his ministry, for his task as the Christ. In fact Christ means “the anointed one, the Messiah”. The Holy Spirit here is showing Jesus as the Christ, empowering him, showing that God’s choice, God’s blessing, God’s favour and power are resting upon him, upon this man Jesus. He is now starting his public ministry, that is what the Spirit’s descent at his baptism is doing and saying. But perhaps there is even more to it. Think back to the beginning of time – the creation of heaven and earth. In Genesis we hear that the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. So too here at the baptism in the river Jordan – the spirit of God is coming down over the waters. Creation, a new creation is the link. Jesus the one being baptised is going to bring in a new creation restoring all that has been damaged and lost by the sins of mankind.

Even the significance of the Spirit coming down like a dove has connotations with Noah at the end of the flood. There a dove comes, letting him know that now there is a brand new start for the earth after the destruction that sin

bought. So again, at Christ's baptism we see the symbols of a dove, the Holy Spirit, water – a new creation. Jesus baptised in the water of the Jordan, anointed with the Holy Spirit, the dove descending upon him – Jesus is to show us a new created world, and we can be newly created people: His people.

The heavens are opened, the spirit descends and now the third thing, a voice comes from heaven saying “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.” The term Son and daughter give us an identity. Do you remember being introduced as “this is my daughter or my son”.

Perhaps you have introduced your grandchildren and said this is so and so's son or daughter. This helps the person figure out where your grandchild fits into the family. It leaves little doubt about who they are. For thirty years, Jesus had been hidden away in a tiny town called Nazareth as the son of a local carpenter, the son of Joseph and Mary. When he was 12 he was taken to the temple and we get our first hint that Jesus was different from other boys, but this was just a tiny glimpse of who he is. But when Jesus walks out of the water of the Jordan, the voice and the dove leave no doubt as to who he is. This up till now ordinary man from Nazareth is not just the Son of Mary and Joseph, but he is God – God's own Son, sent to this earth with a very special mission. We are given a peek into the eternal relationship between Jesus, the Son of God, and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus' identity is revealed

This is God our Father, exclaiming his love for his only son, For God so loved the world, loved us, that he gave

his one and only Son for us, that we might not perish but instead be saved through faith in him. This is God's own Son who now sets out on his journey, beginning from his baptism.

At our baptism we were given a new identity. For most of us we were new to this world when our parents brought us to be baptised, but even though we were very new additions to our parent's families, we were made even newer. We were given new life as God's sons and daughters. Just as Jesus was God's chosen Son, so also we are God's chosen people, adopted into God's family as his sons and daughters when we were baptised. We know that come what may during our earthly journey, our Heavenly Father will never desert his sons and daughters. He will always be on hand to support us when life's problems are too much to bear. He lifts us up when we are down, he forgives us when we go wrong and guilt makes us miserable, and he gives us his never ending love even when we don't deserve it.

Right from the very beginning of our relationship with God, God deals with us graciously. When we were baptised and most of us were baptised as infants, there was nothing that we contributed to our adoption into God's family. God didn't accept us because he could see a good spot in us somewhere. Most of us were completely unaware of what was happening. Yet God in his love and mercy freely and graciously brought us into his family and gave us the blessings that come from Jesus dying and rising. We were washed clean, made holy and new and

brought into a relationship with God. We were given our identity, not just named; we became God's sons and daughters.

We too are on a journey that starts with our baptism. We too are given the Holy Spirit, who creates faith in our hearts and empowers us for a life of Christian service and witness. Our Heavenly Father's voice comes from heaven and says to each one of us; "You are my beloved child, because of my son Jesus Christ I am well pleased with you".

As today as we recall the baptism of Jesus, let us remind ourselves of our own commitment to be like him. To love and show compassion, to obey and urge others to do the same, to be forgiving and considerate, to show understanding and to value all people.

When we were baptised a tremendously intimate relationship was established between Christ and us. We seek to speak and think and act toward others as Jesus did while on earth, for we are one with Him.

We are all part of the same body of Christ. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We are new creations, the old has gone, and the new has come!

In spite of our failures, we still belong to God. The simple unimpressive water of baptism assures us that his love and forgiveness are as strong as ever. He says to us, "You are my child, whom I Love, with you I am well pleased." Let it be so. Amen