

## The Baptism of Christ

Mark 1:4-11

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 Mark, and I have to say it's the briefest and scantiest of all three gospels.

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."

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 a 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 links up with what the reading says in the book of Acts when Paul visits Ephesus and asks if they have received the Holy Spirit and questioned their baptism when he received a negative reply. 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 symbol 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.” This is God our Father, exclaiming his love for his only son, a son willing to die on the cross for us. 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.

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".

Just as his baptism is a start of a journey for Christ, so too our own baptism is the start of our Journey with Christ.

It may be that we do not remember our baptism, I suspect most of us were baptised as babies, but whether baptised as infants, children or adults, this is the start of our Journey Together in Christ. We are welcomed into the family of the church, called to be members of his body, called to be followers of Christ, repenting of our sins and denying Satan and his power.

In these difficult times that we are facing with Covid and its restrictions on our lives perhaps we may sometimes think we are travelling alone? Does the way you travel seem all uphill?

Well, take comfort my friends because there is a great joy and consolation in being part of the church. Christians belonging together in Christ, we are not travelling alone. We have support, guidance, sustenance, encouragement, and fellowship and companionship along the way. Jesus too needed his companions to help him on his journey back towards the Father. Some of us may have been travelling a long time, some very new to the journey, some may have made rapid progress and some have travelled slow and steady.

As we journey together, no one need feel isolated, for we travel with each other and we have Christ as our companion on the journey of life. If we stumble and fall, God picks us up and so we continue our journey.

Now there is no doubt about it, times are difficult, and our faith is questioned, yet something touches deep down in all our hearts, presents us with the challenge to turn from sin and to keep faithful to the God who loves us.

We were purified and made holy at our Baptism, just as Christ was pure and holy.

So today as we recall the baptism of Jesus, let us think of our own baptismal vows to trust and follow the Lord for He is with us for all times and in all situations.