

SUNDAY 8 JANUARY 2023  
*THE BAPTISM OF JESUS* [Joy]

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Word association – I wonder what you picture in your mind for the word *Baptism*. Could it be the episode of the *Vicar of Dibley* where Alice has prepared the baby by dressing her in a beautiful Christening robe, but, just before she hands her daughter over to the bishop to be Baptised, she whips off the dress to reveal a mini yellow polka dot bikini. Or perhaps the baptism of a son or daughter, maybe here in this church of St James the Less. A baby held by the vicar beside the font and god parents waiting to make promises on the baby's behalf. But I also wonder how many of you remember your own Baptism; probably not very many of you? I remember mine. It took place in the baptistery (which is like a very large tank) in our church when I was fourteen years old.

So what is Baptism all about?

In our gospel reading, we see Jesus coming to his cousin John the Baptist and asking John to baptise him. Jesus by this time was probably about thirty years old. John would have been about the same age, but he was a public figure, drawing huge crowds to hear him preach and also baptising many people in the River Jordan.

John was a fiery preacher, and told those who listened to him that they had to totally change the way they were living because God was about to send his long promised Messiah to them. If they wanted to be part of the Messiah's new kingdom, they had to ask for their sins to be forgiven and start to live the way they knew God required them to live.

Baptism would be a public sign that they were making this commitment. Baptism required water, a river or pool in which others would see them being actually washed – in fact, totally immersed, thus the obvious symbolism to indicate that their sins were then washed away. John doesn't want to baptise Jesus because he feels that Jesus has no sin that needs to be washed away. Jesus is in fact the one John, through his preaching, has been preparing the crowds to meet; he is the Messiah.

John says that it is all the wrong way round; Jesus should be baptising *him*. But Jesus insists; he says to John: *Let it be so now for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness*. It's an odd sort of reply, but we could perhaps think of

it like this. As a teacher, I always felt that if I expected my pupils to behave in a certain way then I had to set the example .

Jesus wanted people to be able to relate to him: he didn't shout or threaten those who came to him with awful retribution as John did. He recognised that people needed an act of public commitment to show to themselves and others what following God meant for them. The Jews had always relied on the fact that they were Abraham's descendants, and thus carried in their genetic makeup the genes of their great forefather Abraham who was God's chosen founder of their race.

But what Baptism indicates is that none of us carries a special gene that makes us acceptable to God regardless of how we behave. We are not Christians because our parents or grandparents were. Neither does the water poured over us or in which we were immersed magically make us spiritually clean. It would be like going to a wedding service and the bride and groom expecting to suddenly fall in love as they exchange rings – the rings would do the magic. Baptism is an outward witness to others that the individual has already given their life to God.

This is why, if someone has been baptised as a baby, they are expected to later be confirmed so that they can make those same promises to God that their Godparents made for them when they were a baby. For Jesus, he receives the confirmation from God that he has done the right thing .Symbolically the Holy Spirit appears as a dove and God's voice is heard saying: *This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased*. From this moment, Jesus begins his public ministry which will ultimately end with his crucifixion. This story is recorded in all four gospels.

If you can use your imagination, it happens on the banks of the river Jordan. A rather small muddy stream today, and probably not much different 2,000 years ago. However, many thousands of people from all over the world still come to the same spot every day of the year to be Baptised in the Jordan, and publically confirm their faith. It is not a pretty or attractive place, still muddy and murky as it would have been at the time of Christ.

I started by asking you what BAPTISM meant to you. I would like to return briefly to my own Baptism on a cold Sunday evening in October. After the service was over and the candidates had all dried off and changed their clothes, the large baptistery pool had to be drained. That evening, one of the pipes burst and water went flooding across the road and down the hill into the Billiard Hall opposite. One of the men who were playing there at the time came across and

into the church to see what was going on. Later, as a result of this incident, both he, his wife and young daughter joined our church family and became active members of the congregation. *God moves in very mysterious ways his wonders to perform.*

At the end of his Gospel, Mathew says that Jesus gave his followers some brief instructions, part of which were about baptism. So this act of commitment was very much part of his teaching and mission. It marked the beginning of Jesus's public ministry and its end when he had to hand it over to others. He trusted those first disciples although he knew all about them, their hopes and their failings. He trusted them to continue and spread his message of love and salvation. And they did continue to spread his message, despite many difficulties and setbacks. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be here today.

They have handed on the baton to us; we face other problems in fulfilling Christ's commission to spread the good news of God's love, but we know that like Jesus at his Baptism we don't go forward in our own strength but with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The final words of Jesus to the eleven disciples after his resurrection were: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... and remember I am with you always to the end of the age.*

As we begin 2023, I would like to leave you with the first verse of a very well-known hymn which could be our prayer for the future and which we will sing as our offertory hymn later in the service:

*Lead us heavenly father, lead us  
O'er the worlds tempestuous sea;  
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,  
For we have no help but thee.  
Yet possessing every blessing  
If our God our father be.*

Amen