

Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1.1-5; Acts 19.1-7.

Baptism of Christ – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Epiphany: 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021 10:30a.m. Zoom from St. Andrew's Vicarage

Today is the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Epiphany and the day we commemorate the Baptism of Christ by that famously hirsute hero from the N.T.. I'm grateful to Cally Hammond, Dean at Gonville & Caius College in Cambridge, for pointing out, how much wearing camel-hair clothing and eating locusts sounds less like scripture and more like a challenge on *I'm a Celebrity: Get me out of Here!*

But then again, and as the Dean went on to say, anyone who's ever worn a camel-hair coat will also know what an indulgent luxury that can be. To be fair to St. John, perhaps the Baptist deliberately chose only the scratchy, guard hair on the surface of the pelt, rather than the lovely, soft, fluffy part just beneath. At any rate and for sure, his meals were genuinely kosher! (see Lev.11.22), but I'll come back to St. John in a moment.

Ben Quash, professor of Christianity at Kings College, London, was once helped to appreciate the Genesis story of creation by imagining Noah telling it to his family in the dark confines of the Ark, when the world had been all but completely destroyed. It's a story that can speak to us most powerfully whenever we doubt our world and ourselves, whenever darkness and chaos seem in the ascendant.

So, in the season of Epiphany, the darkest time of the year, and at a time when the world seems darker than usual thanks to a certain virus, it makes sense to listen to the story of how light came out of darkness, and how the waters of chaos were made to yield up every kind of life by the infinitely creative

power of God. As we are told in that of a great story of beginnings, the prologue to John's Gospel, Jesus, the light of the world entered into the world's deepest darkness and yet kept on shining.

And so, as the yearly recollection of Jesus baptism reminds us, the son of God went into the water of the Jordan in solidarity with our sin and emerged to an open heaven that showered promise and delight. The new creation was afoot.

No chaos is greater than God's power to create. If God can enter the world even *ex nihilo*, from nothing, then God can always heal the world, however catastrophically it may seem to be failing, or falling back into chaos.

In Acts, we hear Paul acting with episcopal authority and apostolic faith to new Christian believers in Ephesus. We witness people who have been exposed by followers of John the Baptist to some basic aspects of the Christian faith, but whose faith, education and experience are not yet mature. The most vital experience they lack is that of the Holy Spirit, which Paul brings them via the laying on of hands and his teaching. This can be regarded as an early form of confirmation, where the seal of the spirit is conferred on the newly baptised.

For the joy of faith to be fully alive in us, we are invited to receive the Holy Spirit into our hearts. So, on this day when receive it happily. But let us also remember that the same Holy Spirit can also drive us out into the desert, as it did to Jesus.

Both John and Jesus wanted to give people a sense of the primordial goods of life, and a suspicion that some of the constructs of human society make life more complicated than necessary.

As we've heard, Camel-hair coats, locusts and wild honey were probably not as penitential as they sound. Perhaps the point of talking about such things was that they weren't farmed or sold at market; they were part of God's bounty in nature. Jesus would later celebrate that same bounty when he invited his followers not to be over-anxious about how they would clothe or feed themselves, but consider instead the Lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Mt. 6.26, 28).

Even the wilderness immediately around the Jordan where John preached and baptised wasn't (and apparently still isn't) arid and desert-like either; it's quite lush and verdant. So perhaps John and Jesus both offer us reminders of Eden - the fundamental goodness of creation - in which humans, wild beasts and angels all coexist well with one another. We can live well on what God provides, if we don't live with too much fear, or with too much greed. [God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light](#) (Gen.1.3).