

Sermon 11.1.09 –The Baptism of Christ – Gen. 1.1-5; Mark 1.4-11; Acts 19.1-7.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

The New Year is a time when we often resolve to do things differently, to begin again, as it were. And today, all our readings today seem to focus on new beginnings and on the power of God to bring them about.

They begin with those very familiar words from Genesis, revealing the presence and power of God in creation ...

This week John and I went to see “The theory of Everything”, the film about Stephen Hawking, a brilliant man, but one who found it hard to believe in a Creator God. Darwin was another, whose theory of evolution seemed to cast doubt, for many, on the the Biblical account. We live in a very scientific and skeptical age, don’t we, but I don’t think we should be dismayed by that – it gives us a golden opportunity to witness to what *we* believe. I have never had a problem with evolution and creation being two sides of the same coin. I see the Genesis account as a pictorial, or poetic way of understanding a deeper truth, that throughout that process of growth, development and change, God’s powerful hand has been – and continues to be - at work in our world.

And through the birth of Jesus, and his baptism which we celebrate today, the presence and power of God are seen once more, in the most remarkable new beginning of all time ...

Matthew, Mark and Luke, all tell us about the Baptism of Jesus ... and whilst John doesn’t give an account of it, we are left in no doubt that it happened.

It was clearly an event of supreme importance.

According to the apostle John, it was the baptism of Jesus that revealed him to John the Baptist.

***“I would not have known him”, said John, “except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain, is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit’. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God. (John 1.33-34)***

John the Baptist’s dress and lifestyle mirrored that of the prophet, Elijah, who was expected to herald the Messiah. Indeed, later Jesus was to say to his disciples ***“If you are prepared to believe it, John the Baptist is the Elijah who was to come.” (Matt. 11.15)*** And we know that John’s compelling preaching – calling men to make ready for the Messiah – drew crowds from all over Judea. And for me, what makes his message so authentic, is that, despite his evident popularity, he pointed people away from himself towards Jesus ... the one he described as ***“the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” ... (John 1.29), one whose sandals he felt unworthy to stoop down and untie ...***

His was what you might call a back to basics message, calling people to turn back to God, to repent, and as a sign of that change of heart and mind, to be baptized.

For a long time I didn't realise just how revolutionary this call to baptism was. Jewish life was steeped in ritual cleansing, but baptism was for gentile converts to Judaism. Not for them, the covenant people of God ... the children of Abraham. Yet, extraordinarily, we're told, people flocked to John from far and wide and were baptised by him in the River Jordan... the washing of their bodies being symbolic of a change of heart and mind ...

No wonder, the Pharisees and the Sadducees came out to see what was going on! According to Matthew, John called them "***a brood of vipers***", and challenged them "***to produce fruit in keeping with repentance***". (*Mathew 3.7-8*)

But if John's baptism was a baptism of repentance ... why did Jesus ... who was without sin ... need to be baptised?

Well, first of all, in accepting John's baptism, Jesus was *endorsing* his message, and identifying with those who came seeking salvation.

Secondly, it was a *turning point* in his life. Until then, he had been living in relative obscurity. Coming forward for baptism by John marked a *moment of decision* .... perhaps a moment of recognition that he was called to ministry.

More than that, though, it was a step of *obedience*. It was not that Jesus had any need of repentance or forgiveness. It was an essential part of God's plan of salvation that he identify completely with the penitent people of God.

And no sooner had he taken that step of obedience, than he received the presence and power of the Holy Spirit ... and he heard God's loving affirmation "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased"

These words have enormous significance – coming from two scriptures every Jew would have known ...

The first, from Psalm 2, is a description of the promised Messianic king ...

The second, the suffering servant from Isaiah, indicating the path of suffering he would be called to take.

It was from this moment that his public ministry ... and the attendant challenges ... began.

We are sometimes inclined to think, aren't we, that Jesus is somehow above ordinary human experience. But the fact that, immediately after his baptism, he grappled with temptations in the wilderness ... is proof, if we needed it, of the humanity of Jesus.

What his baptism .. and indeed all that subsequently happened to him ... reveals to me is that, in laying aside the power of his godliness, and identifying totally with us in all our human weakness and frailty, he can understand all that afflicts us in life, and is present with us in it.

We can sometimes feel quite daunted, can't we, by the challenges of the Christian life.

Well, I'm a great fan of Bishop Tom Wright, who writes in a very user friendly way. He speaks of **"hearing Christian people talk as though, having done what he's done in Jesus, God now wants us to get on with things under our own steam."**

**"But that",** he says **"is a tragic misunderstanding. Without the help of God's Spirit, there is *nothing* we can do that will count for God's kingdom. Without God's Spirit, the Church simply can't *be* the Church". \***

**"But,** he says, **through our own baptism, we die to our old life, and are raised to new life *with* and *in* Jesus Christ"**. And, like *him*, we, too, receive the promise of the Holy Spirit, to help us, to comfort us, to guide us and to strengthen us...

So, let's take that to heart. As we face the challenges and opportunities of this new year, let us resolve to be more *open* to his will and *more willing* to seek afresh the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit, so that we will be better equipped to serve him, whatever our situation, and wherever we may be.

\*Tom Wright: Mark for Everyone