

Readings and Sermon for the Baptism of Christ, 10th January 2021

Collect

Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus
revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Genesis 1:1-5

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Acts 19:1-7

19While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' ³Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' ⁴Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared* in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with* water; but he will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit.'

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved;* with you I am well pleased.'

Sermon by Reverend Sara Davies (Assistant Curate)

As we think about the festival of The Baptism of Christ, if I were to ask you whether baptisms can take place during Covid, would you know the answer? It's actually important to keep checking the Government website

to find out the answer to this question, it currently depends on the capacity of the Church. At least this is one question that we can get an answer to, hopefully.

I once went to a talk called “How big is the universe?” which left me in a slight state of panic, the size is beyond our imagination. Our Gospel reading from Genesis about the story of creation gives us an idea of how God created the universe, but unless we accept the account exactly as it is written, it leaves us with many questions to ponder on including how our understanding of time differs from God’s. My Bible commentary says that our galaxy spins at 490,000 miles an hour, but it would still take 200 million years to make one rotation and there are over one billion other galaxies like ours in the universe. Interestingly there is also the suggestion that it requires more faith to believe that the universe ‘just happened’, than it does to believe that God created it.

We hear of how God’s Spirit, or a ‘wind from God’ was actively involved in the creation of the world, whilst our other readings for today talk of how the Holy Spirit is received as a gift during Holy Baptism, open to all of us.

This leads onto the other big question for me and no doubt countless others, if Jesus is perfect and redeems us from our sins, why did he need to be baptised by John the Baptist, who considered himself unworthy of such an act? And why does Mark’s Gospel start with the story of John the Baptist, and not mention the Nativity? I think the answers to some extent are based around the word ‘preparation’.

I’ve looked up a couple of quotes around preparation, my favourites being:

“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” Abraham Lincoln

“Prepare your mind to receive the best that life has to offer.” Ernest Holmes American Writer of Religious Science, born in Lincoln USA, so we seem to have a theme going here!

St. Mark’s Gospel was written primarily for Roman Christians, at a time when they were used to the arrival of important officials, always being announced first by a herald. The arrival of a herald prepared them for who would be coming next. Hence, they would be more interested in hearing of John the Baptist, preparing them for the coming of Jesus, than if the Gospel had started with Jesus’s birth. Mark’s Gospel actually starts with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, so we are actually taken back to the very beginning, in parallel with Genesis, whilst also making it clear as to who Jesus actually is.

There had been preparation for the coming of John by the prophet Isaiah, identifying John as the messenger who would come to prepare the way for Jesus. John’s ministry was far more than simply an announcement, such as a herald would give, it was shown in the way that he lived his life and in the practical actions that he took. Living in the wilderness had been part of Isaiah’s prophecy, but it also allowed John to get away from distractions so that he could hear God’s voice, as well as providing a sharp contrast with the religious leaders who chose to live in luxury and in positions of authority.

John’s work was based around encouraging people to take action to show that they wanted to turn their lives around, turning away from a life of sin and turning back towards God, in preparation for the coming Messiah. John was obviously someone special in his own right, to encourage not just one or two, but people from the whole area of Judea to make the journey into the wilderness and then have an emersion baptism in the waters of the River Jordan. The ritual in itself wasn’t new, but to baptise a Jew as a sign of repentance was a radical departure from Jewish custom. Another question then, why did so many people come?

John’s baptism was not in the name of Jesus or associated with the Holy Spirit. This morning’s reading from Acts tells of Paul meeting disciples in his travels, who had been baptised by John. They were unaware of the Holy Spirit, their previous baptism a sign of repentance from sin, not a sign of new life in Christ; it sounds as if they had moved onto Ephesus before Jesus’ ministry had begun. They then had further preparation to

receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through baptism by Paul, showing visible signs of the Spirit's presence by their prophesying and talking in tongues.

So, having some understanding of John's place within Mark's Gospel, preparing for Jesus's coming, let us turn our attention as to why Jesus, this man without sin, deliberately walked 40-50 miles to be baptised with John's baptism of repentance. John, a man considered too unworthy to even untie Jesus' sandals. Perhaps we should remember that Jesus was never 50% human, 50% divine, he was fully human and fully divine. As a human he shared the human experience of being alienated from God because of sin, he was born in a violent, occupied country and understood the deceptions of the human heart. Whilst problems were no doubt different 2000 years ago, maybe the world that we live in is just as unsettled as the world that he found himself in. We seek to lead by example, hence the horror of the situation in America this week; we look to those who lead us for stability. Jesus as Son and servant, identifies with humans, then and now, in our need for repentance and forgiveness, even though he has no need to do so for himself.

Jesus's submission to John makes sense if we understand repentance as preparation for what is to come. "Prepare your mind to receive the best that life has to offer" in the words of Ernest Holmes. Repentance prepares us for a glorious beginning. The response to the baptism of Christ leads to something greater than John and those watching alongside him could no doubt ever have imagined; the heavens are torn open and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, not as a wind but as a dove, a sign of hope. As in the story of creation, the Holy Spirit is present with enormous creative force; at the River Jordan, God declares that Jesus is indeed his Son, the Beloved. What John prepares, Jesus fulfils. Baptism with the Holy Spirit offers both forgiveness of sin and life in Christ.

We currently still find ourselves in a time of preparation. We may have come through Advent, preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ whilst also preparing for the second coming, but any new year involves plans for the coming months, 2021 more so than most. As a country there are plans in place to roll out the Covid vaccine, cope with increasing numbers of ill people. In the Church on-line worship needs a greater amount of planning, plans have to be put in place for how we can continue to serve God's people whilst keeping everyone safe, and thought given to how we keep our churches going financially. "How big is the universe?" seems quite a small question in comparison to all that is going on around us!

What do we do? Are we looking towards end times or are we actually planning for a new beginning? What has God got in store for us? Yes, another one of the big questions.

What can we take away from what we have heard today? Are we heralds, preparing the way for the arrival of something important? Maybe we identify with John, getting away from distractions so that we can hear what God is saying to us at this present time. Are we stood watching as something amazing happens in front of our eyes, or are we more likely to take some practical action, perhaps trying to lead others by our example? We could of course be over-preparing, wasting our time sharpening an axe for a tree that will never be felled.

As with many questions, there's often no, one, right answer, other than in this instance, recognising that the subject of 'good news' is a person named Jesus. For most of Jesus's first 30 years of life, he led a very normal life, so normal we only know parts of it. Whilst Jesus was indeed unveiled as fully divine at his baptism, we have already seen how he identified with those he lived amongst, making the same journey into the wilderness as everyone else, entering the same murky waters.

Jesus did not intentionally set himself apart. As we listen for what God is saying to us, may we make our plans together, and show visible signs of how the Holy Spirit is present in us. Amen