



BAPTISM OF CHRIST

(First Sunday of Epiphany)

9th January 2022



Image by 'Waiting for the Word' on Flickr found at:

<https://media.ascensionpress.com/2019/01/13/why-did-christ-have-to-be-baptized/>

THE GOSPEL: Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

In the wilderness John proclaimed a baptism of repentance. As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

May I speak in the name of the living God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

One year ago, we had taken the decision to suspend public worship and moved, for the third time in a year, back to services being online only. The church building remained open for private prayer, but, in light of the fast spreading Delta variant of COVID-19 and with the advice from the central church, government and local council, we were once again on Zoom. This also corresponded with the first Sunday since I had been licensed as priest in charge of St Augustine's alongside of my role and our shared ministry here. Oh how much change one year can bring, and how different things are since then, and yet, with great determination, we continue to mark, celebrate and dive into, familiar feasts, celebrations and remembrances in the life of the church.

Talking with a friend, this week, I was reminded of the shape of our liturgical year, which begins anew every Advent. The year, amidst all the different feasts and festivals, is roughly broken into two parts – the life and ministry of Jesus and the life and ministry of the church. It would be, no surprise to you, an impossible task to completely separate these two parts for we, every week, are asking God, 'What are you saying today and what can I learn? What can I do to be closer to you, closer to others and closer to creation?' Within this overlap, however, we hold intentional space to listen, learn, inwardly digest, and practice in our lives, the building blocks of our faith and of God's mission and life in the world.

Theologian, Diana Butler-Bass, regularly reminds us of participation in 'the second naivety'. This focuses on the experience of coming back to the same place with a recognition that you have been here before but an openness to learn again, as if for the first time, from this space. The church

year, and when we pay attention in our own cycles of the year, rely on this principle - we have been here before, we will be here again, and there is still more to learn and experience.

What are Advent, Christmas and Epiphany if not invitations into the familiar to be re-ruptured by the love, grace, mercy and presence of God in our world and in our lives?

So why are we back here again? Objectively, we could simply say that these moments, these stories, are important to our faith. To take time to remember and re-invest ourselves in the story of Jesus of Nazareth who, through faithful living to God and participation in the work of God's Kingdom, ruptured the known world and inspired a group of unconventional followers who would, in time, change the shape of the whole world. A fair observation and one that has, for many centuries, been at the heart of the Christian story.

We could point to the way the historical church, through its councils and structural developments, made a (more-or-less) universal calendar to help our communal life to be shared across time and space ensuring that we all received the same basic discipleship and that we learn about the people, themes and truths most important to our faith.

We can look specifically at the developments and changes through the creation and growth of the Church of England. We can look at its past, present and ongoing life in England and more broadly in the world-wide Anglican communion. And, although all of these things are true and have some ongoing importance for us, for our shared life, for our understanding of our history, what has become important for me, over the past weeks, is the

remembrance of those two parts I mentioned earlier – the life and ministry of Jesus, and the life and ministry of the church,

You will have heard me say, on numerous occasions over the past four years, that at the heart of the sacrament of Baptism is this affirmation that we read in our Gospel this morning, the words of God the Father to Jesus, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' In Baptism we affirm that the most true thing about all people is that we are fully known and fully loved by God. And, that God's love for us reminds us of our eternal belonging to God's family. A kinship that is not dependent upon what we have done or will do, and is not contingent upon us doing 'the right' thing. We are known, we are loved, we are welcomed and we are home in the life of the Holy Trinity.

And, although I will advocate for this truth till my dying breath, in Jesus' life we are welcomed not solely into knowledge of this truth but into a way of living that comes from this reality.

It has long been said that if the only real purpose of the life of Jesus was to die to pay the unpayable debt of sin, and if Jesus was sinless and needed to die as a sinless human, then when Jesus' death happens matters less than the fact that he dies. He could have been killed with the many children during the Slaughter of the Innocents at the hands of Herod and that should have accomplished the same thing. He could have been raised from the dead and then carried on to call, disciple, and send out men and women from that resurrected life. But, as we know, that is not the case.

As we remember and testify to year upon year, Jesus is born to Mary and is, before he has done anything during his earthly life, recognised as the Messiah and proclaimed as God's salvation for the world; and this testimony

comes, interestingly, from those inside the camp of the people of God and those outside of it. We sit in the wonder of God's commitment to be God with us, to participate in the world with us, and to work with us to build God's very kin-dom on earth. We hear of God's unconditional love that springs up from the very life of God, in the Holy Trinity, being incarnate into the world we inhabit. We are challenged to ask what this commitment, this participation, this belonging means for us as we look into the face of baby Jesus, before he has done anything that we can follow or imitate.

From Advent we oscillate from the prophecies and anticipation of Jesus coming (and second coming), to Jesus birth, to his baptism, to his presentation in the temple as a child and back to his earthly ministry. And in this to-and-fro we are welcomed see Jesus as the interpretive key to better understand God's life in the world and the ministry and mission we are welcomed into in our own (both corporate and individual) journey of faith. If we do not see, recognise and accept the mission of God in Jesus, we will never be able to see, recognise and accept the mission of God in the church.

The Baptism of Christ holds the through-line of Jesus the eternal Son who, with the Father and Spirit, created the heavens and the earth; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary; who was crucified, died, risen and ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father; and who will come to judge the living and the dead. The Baptism of Jesus reminds us of the anchor point of these 'moments' in the life of Jesus. The one who created, the one who was born and died, the one who was resurrected and ascended, the one who is still to come, is the same one who is 'the Son, the beloved, in whom the Father is well pleased.'

We have no guarantees of what this next year holds, even if we have hopes, dreams and plans of what the next twelve months will entail. Who knows what reflections we will have in 2023, or what shape our shared life and ministry will look like. Regardless of what the unknown brings, we have begun a new year with being reminded of God's mission and life in the world through the life of Jesus. We have been invited into being re-ruptured, re-orientated, re-minded of a new way of being in the world as we see, recognise and accept the love of the Father, made manifest in Jesus and shared through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. With this anchoring, with this truth, our actions of care, of love, of forgiveness, of presence to others, become conduits into the very life of God in our world and in our lives.

So, let us, pay careful attention, opening our eyes, ears, minds and hearts to the ongoing work of God's Holy and life-giving Spirit in Jesus, for if we see, recognise and accept God's mission in Jesus, then we will, together, be able to see, recognise, accept and live-out God's mission through the church.

Amen.

Revd Timothy Miller