



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Darren McFarland

Reading: Luke 3.15-17 & 21-22

Comparing our gospel this morning with the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, what St Luke communicates in just two short verses can hardly be described as a detailed account of this pivotal event which is recorded in all four gospels; in fact, he gives us hardly more than a passing reference to a past event.

But why? What's Luke's problem with the baptism of Jesus? Well, from the earliest history of the Church, many Christians have struggled with this public event which inaugurates Jesus' public ministry. Why was it necessary for the sinless one to come to the Jordan to be baptized with John's 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'? It's not as if he needed to be baptized, that he had sins to be washed away, that his divine nature lacked anything that an anointing with the Spirit could make good, that the voice from heaven was going to tell him something about himself that he didn't already know. Unlike John's other candidates for baptism, this was no soldier or tax collector seeking a fresh start and a new beginning – this was Jesus, the Word made flesh, true God and true man.

The fact that Luke fails to mention that it was John who baptized Jesus may suggest a degree of embarrassment, but if Luke were so troubled by this event, then surely he would have omitted it altogether from his gospel. No, for Luke as for the other evangelists, Jesus' baptism is of central importance, the springboard for his mission and ministry; but for Luke in particular, what he wants to draw his readers' attention to is not so much the baptism itself, which he doesn't describe, but what happens after it.

Here, in this third chapter of his Gospel, the descent of the Spirit and the divine voice don't come as the newly baptized is emerging from the water, as in Matthew and Mark, but afterwards, while he is praying. And that, I think, is significant. This prayer of Jesus which Luke highlights is an act of surrender and dedication to what his baptism has signified. It is his response to what he has recognized as God's call and his vocation. Jesus' prayer is his response to his baptism, and the descent of the Spirit and the divine voice are God's response to his response.

“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”.

In Luke's Gospel, this dramatic proclamation of divine identity is followed immediately by Jesus' family tree, as his human ancestry is traced back from his step-father Joseph through seventy-seven generations until it finally reaches his first parent, Adam. What's interesting here is that when the great list of ancestors reaches Adam, Luke describes him as 'son of God'.

This morning, in order for us to grasp the significance of the baptism of Jesus and, more importantly, of our own baptism, we need to learn from Luke that both Jesus and Adam merit the title 'son of God'.

There is so much that can be said about the life-changing experience which takes place in the font. At Easter we celebrate baptism as our participation in Christ's death and resurrection, dying and rising to new life with him. At Epiphany, we celebrate the connection between Jesus' baptism and our baptism, the awesome mystery through which Christ not only stands alongside us in the water but also identifies himself with us, completely and utterly, so that we might become one with him for eternity.

That such a transformation is possible is so outrageous as to sound blasphemous. And yet, through our washing in the waters of rebirth, the Spirit descends on us, as he did on Jesus, and fills us with his incarnate presence. In the waters of the font, the words of the Father, spoken to Jesus as he was praying, proclaim our identity as much as his: "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased".

In these days between Epiphany and Candlemas the Church explores the ways in which Christ is made manifest to the world – first to the wise men who seek a new born king, then at his Baptism when he is revealed as God's beloved Son as his public ministry begins, and then next week when we hear of water changed into wine in Christ's first display of his power, the first of the great signs of St John's Gospel at the wedding feast at Cana. And the challenge to us is to work out our response to the reality of who this Christ is – he is shown to us, to the world and so what?

Today we remember the two great sacraments which the Church teaches are necessary for our salvation. We rejoice in the generosity of God at the font and at the altar. And over the next couple of Sunday's I want us all to consider how we make a response to God which is as generous as we are able. PCC members and those who have read the current magazine will know that parish finances are on our minds more than usual because of changes to our local banking arrangements and also the diocesan adoption of the new Church of England Parish Giving Scheme. There will be more information on the nut and bolts of that next week, but in the face of the gospel we grapple with how we show our thanks to God not only with our lips but in our lives, and how we are generous towards God's work, which for this small part of the kingdom, has believe or not, been placed in the frail human hands of St Andrew's Church.

When it comes to our giving, whether financial or otherwise, it's not the P.C.C. or the Parish Giving Scheme which is challenging us about our giving to the church. It is the Gospel of the Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the new life which is our through baptism. We rejoice in the depth and breadth and power of God's love for all creation, and for us his beloved sons and daughters. And yet, so often, we settle for the most mediocre things when it comes to

resourcing the work of the Church - our Young Church and adult education, our outreach and mission.

So often, as Christians, we prefer to talk about our separation from God, our dissimilarity, our unworthiness, the disfiguring sin which separates us from him and from one another. And, of course, there is an important place for that. But Lent is still more than a few weeks away, and if we really believe in the radical truth of the incarnation, then we must also talk about our union with God, our similarity, and the mirror which we can hold up to ourselves and to others in which is revealed the anointed face of Jesus.

All of this begins with baptism. But, as Jesus shows by his prayer on the banks of the Jordan, baptism is far more than a beginning, of much greater significance than an isolated event in the past. For many of us today's festival gives us an opportunity to celebrate our identity as the baptized people of God and to thank God for it. But this great feast shouldn't in any way leave us feeling smug and self-satisfied about ourselves. For it is also a challenge to everyone of us, whether we have been baptized or not, to consider where God is leading us at the beginning of this new year, by waiting on him in prayer and opening our hearts and minds to listen and to respond to his call and his generosity.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”.

Sermon preached on Sunday 13 January 2019, the baptism of Jesus