

Sunday 9th January – The Baptism of Christ

Sermon by Liz Barnes

God's Holy Spirit, as Luke will show again and again in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, fulfils the preaching of the prophets, and the first moment of that fulfilment is not Easter, or even Pentecost, but the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan.

The Baptism of Jesus, recorded in all four Gospels, introduces us to the adult Jesus beginning his ministry among people who had been drawn to want to change their lives by the preaching of his cousin John the Baptist. They had flocked out to John at the river Jordan and made their public commitment and desire to change by being baptised.

Jesus then came to be baptised as his fellow humans had, with a desire to show his commitment to God's way. As we know at his baptism the Spirit descended on him in visible form, and a voice from heaven said, 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.' This affirmation from God came as part of his prayer, his reflection on his growing sense that his mission was to meet the world's need for God's love by interpreting the Scriptures and traditions in a way that would set them free to live as God's people, precious, honoured and loved' as Isaiah had said all God's people were.

Many of us were baptised as babies – a sacrament which still has the power to lift the spirits of a congregation and for most of us we probably don't remember our baptism – we may well have been too young to be aware of what was going on. But there will have been other occasions when we have had the opportunity to affirm our commitment to live in God's way: at confirmation, or at Easter ceremonies, or at particular moments very personal to ourselves. At every Communion service we offer ourselves to God afresh. And whenever we commit ourselves to God, God meets us with the gift of his life, to sustain us as we learn for ourselves what it means to be loved. That relationship with God is then lived out in our relationships with other people, and with the whole of creation.

The most important journey of our lives is discovering that we are truly loved – loved by our family and friends, yes, but most importantly and fundamentally – loved by God.

It appears simple and straightforward to believe and accept that you are called, valued and loved by God. But, in practice, it can be hard. Our fragile human nature means that our most direct experience of love, our love for one another, can be flawed however well we have been loved and nurtured by others. So, we need to grow into knowing ourselves to be utterly and unconditionally loved by God.

It's also easy to feel that in order for God to love us, we need to improve. But God loves us first and it is when we know God loves us that we can be transformed. We will never be holy enough or pure enough or good enough in our own strength, but God's mercy and generosity are unbounded, and he draws us into his love just as we are – then as we stand in his love, we are transformed to become the people God intends us to be.

Just as Jesus stood affirmed in the love of his heavenly father at his baptism those heavenly words spoken to him “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” are a powerful reminder to us that we do not have to do anything to receive the love of God in our hearts, or his grace in our lives. Our baptism is the beginning of that lifelong journey into knowing ourselves to be loved, called, and accepted by God. For it is when we know ourselves to be beloved that we too can love that we are released to be our true selves, truly to worship and serve God and to be in the loving relationship with God we were created and formed for.

In the fragility of our humanity, we find our identity in being beloved by God by being open to being nourished by God for our journey as we break open the word of God and hear the story of His love and as we break bread together and are fed at Holy Communion. And we can choose to spend time in God's presence too, waiting on God and being steeped in his love. It is this love and affirmation for us that is at the heart of our faith. God's unconditional love for us, and Jesus showing us the infinite value of human beings in God's eyes.

As we begin a New year, I encourage you to try to find time every day, even if it is only a few minutes, wherever you are, to be quiet and to allow yourself to rest in God's love – to know yourself to be his precious beloved child. May each one of us always find strength in the Christian faith into which we were baptised, and may God's blessing always dwell richly with us and all those we love. Amen.

We regret we are unable to provide the prayers this week.