

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

The Baptism of Christ

January 2025

Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

We hear about the baptism of Christ in all four gospels, which makes it an emphatically important story in the life of Jesus. Each account has its variations, as you'd expect, but for all of them the baptism marks Jesus' first appearance at the beginning of his ministry.

Mark tells us simply that Jesus was baptised by John, and that the voice from heaven was heard as he emerged from the water. The element in the story that is unique to Mark, is that he says Jesus saw *the heavens torn apart*. That's powerfully put, and it's intriguing that it doesn't make it into the other accounts (especially as Matthew and Luke would have had Mark's version to hand).

Luke, as you just heard, is also pithy in his description, not even saying that Jesus was baptised by John (although we can assume it). His unique bit of the story is that Jesus was praying after being baptised, when he saw heaven opened and the Spirit descending. It's a calmer scene, focussed in on Jesus' interior life.

Matthew amplifies the story a bit. His is the version where we hear John remonstrating with Jesus. *I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?* To which Jesus replies, with words which have puzzled interpreters ever since. *Let it be so.... To fulfil all righteousness*. But then it's also remained puzzling why Jesus should indeed be baptised at all, when John's baptism seems to have been all about being cleansed from your sins – not something Jesus needed! Matthew also has God say *This is my Son*, rather than (as in Mark and Luke) *you are my Son*. That makes the moment more public, perhaps.

Then in John we don't see Jesus actually being baptised, but we get other familiar bits of the story, and in expanded form. We hear more of John diminishing himself as he points to Jesus. And the nearest we get to the baptism itself is John saying he saw the Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove, and that he (John) hears God speak. It's as though the baptism itself could be assumed, as everyone knew the story.

I've sketched those differences in the gospel accounts to remind us that here was an event in the life of Jesus which was clearly known in all the traditions, in all the stories told in the years afterwards before the gospels were written – but that those stories were not identical. That's what makes the gospels so interesting; and makes it interesting that we have four of them in our scriptures (not just the one).

You can imagine people telling the story of the baptism from almost immediately after the event, so it's hardly surprising that variations developed. And the key elements are the same, especially the voice of God and the appearance of the Holy Spirit. It's fascinating that the miraculous part of the story is what's common to all four gospels.

I call it miraculous because we see God intervening in the world, intervening in the natural order of things to reveal himself. He reveals himself as Trinity – they hear the Father, seem to see the Spirit and certainly see the Son. And there is a clear arc from this first episode in Jesus' adult ministry to his last, as Matthew tells it. At Jesus' baptism, we see God's Trinitarian self-revelation, and his affirmation of Jesus as beloved; at the end of his earthly life Jesus commissions the disciples to baptise the whole world in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and he affirms them as beloved – *I am with you, to the end of the age*.

When I baptise people I usually use that reading from the end of Matthew's gospel (*go and baptise*) rather than the story of Jesus' baptism, because it says why we baptise, and how. We baptise because Jesus told us to. And we do it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Without those very words, it isn't a Christian baptism at all.

At baptism I also tend to talk about the symbolism of water. I'll say a word or two first about the water being holy, after I have blessed it. That blessing gives a unique, special character to the water of baptism: it's charged with the Holy Spirit, it's now the conduit of the Spirit's action. That's part of what we mean by 'sacramental'.

The symbolism of water is rich, because of the very different ways in which water features in our life.

The most obvious thing water does is *cleanse*. And so this fits perfectly the cleansing we experience in baptism, the cleansing from our sins. The water of baptism washes us clean.

Now of course we're usually baptising a baby, and how can a baby be thought to need cleansing from its sins? What sins?! This is a really useful challenge, because it helps us understand the sort of cleansing from sins which happens in baptism. The cleansing that happens in baptism is of our inescapable capacity to sin, our propensity to sin, our innate imperfection. Baptism cleanses us of our *responsibility* for being sinful, as every single one of us is (because we're not perfect). When the sinless one, Jesus, sank into the water of the Jordan, he was infusing the water of baptism for ever afterwards with his sinlessness. It's as though in every baptism he's saying *I know you aren't going to be perfect, but I love you and always will.*

The second feature of water in our lives is that it is *life-giving*. I always enjoy asking primary school assemblies how much water we have in our bodies. Almost always a few know and shout it out – that we are 60% water, roughly speaking. Our life depends on water, and so does our health.

And so the action of God's Spirit in the water of baptism gives life. *Life in all its fullness* (John 10.10). A spring of water, *gushing up to eternal life* (John 4.14). So in baptism there is spiritual hydration, giving us a never-empty reservoir of health and restoration on which we can draw in times of spiritual thirst.

But over and above that it is drenching us in an abundance of life-giving love. And that idea of drenching nudges us towards the third way that water features in life. Because water can do more than drench. It can drown.

Yes: in baptism water speaks of death. We use the phrase 'dying to sin'. Think of that like the phrase you sometimes hear, 'you're dead to me'. It's a very harsh thing to say to a person, but a very liberating thing to say to sin – especially when you remember that the meaning of the word 'sin' is separation from God. Baptism seals us with the promise that *nothing can separate us from the love of God* (Romans 8.39).

That love was made known to us, made available to us, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When he sinks below the surface of the Jordan, it anticipates his death; and when he emerges again, it points to his resurrection. He was willing to die, to succumb to the ultimate human expression of evil; but death could not hold him. And so in the water of baptism we share in both his death and his resurrection. That's why full immersion baptism can be so powerful, capturing the truth of it in dramatic fashion. I should go and check out the Tiffey.....

Whenever we were baptised, we were invited to share in that encounter with God that we hear in the gospel stories. Sometimes we need to stop and listen; and then we will hear echoes of God's voice saying to us too, *you are my beloved.*