

January 11th 2015. The Baptism of the Lord.

Genesis 1: 1-5, Acts 19: 1-7, Mark 1: 4-11

Today we focus on the baptism of Jesus. Baptism did not begin with John the Baptizer – it was well established as a means of entry or renewal into the Jewish faith and as a symbol of God’s mercy and grace and especially as a sign of repentance and a turning from a past way of life to a new one. Jesus’ baptism was full of drama, beginning with John’s amazement that Jesus would even seek baptism – “I have need of baptism by you,” he declared, “and you come to me!” Some years I have asked you about your baptism, what you remember, what others have told you? I have a photo of my brother’s baptism which most of the family had not seen. Some years ago I sent copies around the family at Christmas.

We can highlight baptisms as important individual or family events. Where did this washing ritual come from?

In the Jewish faith Gentiles - all people who were not Jews - could join by undergoing a washing ritual. John’s baptism was different, however, as it was for Jewish people to show a change of heart, will and mind. This was radical teaching and a change of behaviour. Jewish people had felt that being a descendant of Abraham was enough to be valued by God.

John did not come to the cities for this ritual; rather he invited people to the wilderness, which had always held a special spiritual significance for them. Some prophets highlighted the value of being away from the city to experience God in a special way. People flocked to hear John, to experience his teaching, to see his clothes, to wonder at his diet. After 300 years without a prophet was John such a person? Would he rescue the nation from the Romans? Here he stood by the river Jordan, no pulpit, no pews, but surrounded by curious people. John did not sugar coat the costly truth of following God.

Water features in each baptism story. Reflect on water. What water have you loved this summer? Is it a waterfall cascading down the hillside with rays of light playing on the moving torrent? Is it the gentle movement of water on the lake? The sea may have enticed you to paddle or swim. Perhaps you have had a drink of clear, cool water or moistened your lips for refreshment. You may have had dirty hands and watched them come clean from washing in the hand basin. The water we use in the font reflects the richness of the waters of the world and our experiences of them.

The gospels record the baptism of Jesus in different ways. Mark writes an urgent gospel, sharply focussed. His is the earliest account. Jesus went into the water, then saw the heavens tear open forcefully and the Holy Spirit descend like a dove. A gentle anointing. A voice told Jesus that he was God’s beloved child. “With you,” God said of Jesus, “I am well pleased”. What a simple and profound blessing. What a truth for us all. We are beloved children. We please God. Often if I offer someone a blessing I say, “May God’s face shine with joy because of you”. Those words go back to Aaron, brother of Moses.

John encouraged the crowds to repent. Jesus did not need to do this, but he wanted to support John and his mission.

When we have baptisms here we welcome the person into the family of Christ, the family of the Church. We do not baptise people into the Anglican denomination, but into the whole family of God. I wonder how you have continued that welcome. While we never seek to pressurise baptism for families for often they have gathered from all over the country and sometimes the world. If I were to start my ordained ministry again I would try harder with follow up, helping people link to parishioners and the local church.

It’s important to recognise that while our baptism - which is an outward and visible sign - confirms our belonging in the church family and our commitment to grow within our faith, *not* belong baptised does not prevent us from sharing fully in the community of the Christian faith. Ultimately baptism is of the heart and mind and spirit, for it is the inward and spiritual grace that gives baptism its true meaning. Also, there are no age limits. The oldest person we have baptised was 76.

Baptism at any age is a deeply moving experience affirming the wonderful truth of God’s embrace of us all. So rejoice in your own and in others as we gather together for worship and for life.