

The Baptism of Christ – Evensong 13.1.19

+ Switch on the news this past week, this past month, this past year, and it seems there is more that divides us than unites us: the crucial vote due to take place on Tuesday is dividing our leaders and our country, America is divided over the President's plans to build a dividing wall, Israel, Palestine, the entire Middle East continue to be divided. So today as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, we have more reason than ever to rejoice that the sacrament of Baptism is one thing that does unite the almost 2 billion Christians throughout the world. Transcending other divisions, recognised as valid across Christian denominations, Baptism unites us in the fellowship of faith.

Baptising is one of the enormous privileges that comes with being ordained – it's certainly a favourite part of my job - and Baptism, along with the Eucharist, is one of the two dominical sacraments, that is the ones Jesus himself showed us.

Baptising a baby is a big responsibility, and you may have heard my favourite Baptism story: A colleague of mine who shall remain nameless but who doesn't have children of his own was anxiously receiving a tiny baby one day from her mother's arms. This baby was dressed in flowing, slippery, satin robes and he was understandably nervous to get hold of the baby and not just her dress. So he leant over to take the child from the mother's arms, slipped his hand carefully around the little body and to his surprise felt bare flesh – oh help, had its nappy come off! But he soon realised he'd gone a layer too far and his hand was – well you can imagine where it had ended up – in the mother's blouse.

Before we move on to the significance of Christ's baptism, let's consider for a moment what we understand by our Baptism: which in a nutshell is that as we emerge from the waters of baptism we are cleansed of sin and reborn in the Spirit. We may well ask, as Jesus' first disciples asked, how can someone be reborn? The answer is that at birth we are born of the flesh, and because there's a lot of water involved in birth the Bible describes this as being born of water and the flesh. At Baptism we emerge from the waters of a different womb, this time the font. So we are reborn at our Baptism, this time of water and the Spirit – because this is when the gift of the Holy Spirit is conferred on us and when our Christian life formally begins. It's a new beginning, leading eventually to the altar when we confess our faith for ourselves at Confirmation. A brief aside: of course babies have not committed any sins, what they are being cleansed of is the collective sin of mankind, the sin of their ancestors if you like, which needs to be removed and which God freely does, in order to give them and every baptised person a fresh Christian start.

Jesus was without sin, but by being baptised he is sticking to the script. That is that God himself should descend to the darkest depths of our human condition; that he should be immersed in the cold waters of our sins, our sorrows, our divisions; that he should experience our wretchedness. And all so that we might live.

Already you will see our thoughts are being drawn to Easter, death and Resurrection – Christ dies so that we might live. As St Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

Christ's baptism is so important, and traditionally linked with the Epiphany and the Wedding at Cana, because these three crucial events teach us a huge amount about who Our Saviour was. At the Epiphany which we celebrated last Sunday, the infant Christ was visited by Wise Men, or Magi, who were gentiles, and not the expected recipients of a Messiah. As we celebrate Christ's Baptism today, he is revealed as God's Son, the second person of the Trinity, when the Father's voice thundered from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on him. At the Wedding at Cana, Jesus performed his first miracle, performing this sign to show us himself who he was. So these three events – the Epiphany, Christ's Baptism and the Wedding at Cana - are linked because at the Epiphany the world, as represented by three gentiles, the Magi, showed us who Christ was. At Christ's Baptism God showed quite clearly that this was his Son. And at the wedding at Cana, Jesus himself showed us who he was, as he performed his first miracle and changed water into wine.

Returning to Baptism as we understand it today and you may have noticed that whenever possible priests emphasise the importance of performing baptisms during a service. Of course it isn't always possible, but it's encouraged because we are baptised into a fellowship of faith which is best represented by an entire congregation – the elderly, the young, those we get on well with, the ones we would rather give a wide berth to, that irritating man from down the road, and so on. This is particularly important in today's world, when the divisions so evident in current affairs highlight the need for us to recognise and respect the diversity of those who surround us. As a fellowship of faith, we are a community but the word community is too often misused, giving it an isolationist meaning. We do very definitely belong to the Christian community, the fellowship of faith, but we will also belong to many other, overlapping communities. There's a community of people who live on my street and gather together for street parties and meals. Or the community of BCCS - parents, students and staff. The community which is this entire city, or Diocese, or country. All these communities overlap with others, meaning we are constantly encountering people who are different from us, who have different values and aspirations. And this is how it should be, because if we attempt to consign any one community to life in an isolated bubble, we will lose that sense of an interlocking society which celebrates those things we hold in common, seeking mutual flourishing, whilst respecting our diversity.

At his Baptism Jesus' ministry began and as he emerges from the waters of the River Jordan he shows us what it means to be anointed by the Holy Spirit, to be equipped for what lies ahead. He was living in an often violent, divided world and he shared in the messiness of a constantly squabbling humanity. Throughout his short ministry he transcended community boundaries, he engaged with the outcasts of his day, the isolated, the shunned, the leaders and the religious extremists. He challenged those with whom he disagreed but he never imposed his will through loud shouting, or violence. He demonstrated that through their baptism those who believe in his name are empowered to become children of God, a people united through the privilege of calling God, Father. And through Jesus' example we observe that the most effective weapon we are given with which to combat those things which are contrary to God's will is, quite simply, the love for our neighbour which leads to respect, mutual flourishing and the healing we so badly need. Amen.